

2026 TALK, 22.3.26, LUKE 22:24-37, (JOHN 13)

LENT SERIES (5): 'JESUS, THE DISCIPLES & DISCIPLE-MAKING – BUILDING THE CHURCH THROUGH SMALL GROUPS'

THE GREATEST MIRACLE ?

So what do you reckon? Which is the greatest miracle in the earthly life of Jesus? Lots to choose from. We could each make a case for one miracle or another: calming the storm, feeding the 5,000, numerous cases of amazing healings, the raising of Lazarus, delivering a tormented man from '*legions*' of evil spirits...? You get the point... But what about Jesus washing the disciples feet? I guess we wouldn't consider this a 'miracle', in the same way as these others... But it is clearly a very striking & intentionally memorable event. This was a time when Jesus stripped down to his 'underwear'. This can be seen as a fore-shadowing of Jesus being forcibly stripped naked, before being crucified...

If we were to include miracles *after* the death of Jesus, I think we would probably all agree together – the sacrificial death & the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the greatest Jesus miracle. There is, however, a good argument for seeing the Resurrection as a miracle of Jesus' Heavenly Father, not Jesus himself... ***But is there another miracle of Jesus***, both from his earthly life ***and*** beyond his earthly life, which we could point to here?...

Based on the stories of Luke 22, John 13 and all the events of Jesus' last week on earth, we might begin to say there is another, even bigger miracle that Jesus has done – and is still doing. What about Jesus (& the Holy Spirit) birthing the church?...

It seems to me beyond remarkable that Jesus should choose this group of 12 disciples. Perhaps the greatest miracle of all - that these disciples (and others) would go on to change the world for good. And this is a process which is continuing to this day, across our world. And it's continuing here & now too...

But what do we see here in these accounts of the Last Supper? Shortly after Jesus shares the bread & wine with his friends, what happens? The friends get into an argument. An argument which they were also having on the way to Jerusalem, according to Mark's gospel... They were arguing amongst themselves as to: ***who was the greatest***. No sooner had Jesus first told them, after the Transfiguration, that his death was imminent, than they started their

‘succession planning’. They felt it was essential they should decide who would take over from Jesus in leading the disciples, once he was dead. At the time of Jesus’ greatest jeopardy, when he needed his friends the most, they were arguing about their status. Who was where in the ‘pecking order’... In Luke’s account, Jesus pointedly affirms the disciples for ‘having stood by me in trials’. And here they were flexing their spiritual muscles & trying to out-do each other. And forgetting just what lay ahead for their friend. Not long after this, all the disciples desert Jesus, except Peter. And Peter, under threat of arrest & imprisonment, goes on to disown his Master.

That Jesus should ‘confer a Kingdom’ upon **this** group of people...! Isn’t this the most profoundly gracious miracle? That these disciples should be welcomed to Jesus’ table in the upper room. Not only that, but they should be offered a place of authority, judging the 12 tribes of Israel, in the Kingdom that is to come! Surely this is ridiculous – no? Has God’s grace & mercy gone too far?

How awesome, how almost beyond belief that the Church of Christ should come to be - through such a fearful, foolish & often faithless group of people... I can see myself in those first disciples - forgetting Jesus & thinking about myself & my own future instead. I can see myself in Peter & his bravado. I can see myself in the doubting of Thomas. I can see myself in the desire of all the disciples to have the pre-eminence, to have the first & last word... But it is Jesus who is the Alpha & the Omega. And Jesus certainly has the last word in this story. Jesus tells us: ***‘Follow my example in serving one other. And you will be blessed if you do this...’***

God in Christ has given **us** a Kingdom... Yes US! By God’s Holy Spirit, **we** are being formed into a place where God dwells, even before Jesus comes to reign... This is only possible if we serve one another in love. If we live out Christ’s new commandment to ‘love each other as I have loved you’. Are we walking with Jesus day by day? Are we growing in faith & coming to reflect God’s love more & more?

As with the first disciples, we will at times wonder whether this is possible, or just some fantasy. For sinners like ourselves to share God’s love with others? For us to be God’s light - a shining beacon of hope for the nations ? This is an enormous challenge. A challenge we can only meet with the Holy Spirit’s help & with the help of each other. The greatest miracle of all – is for people like us

to walk with Jesus, with each other & to invite others to join us on this journey... Amen?...

There's nothing particularly profound here. Nothing particularly profound about me - or indeed about me advocating for Carey to launch some more small groups. But one of the reasons why Jesus chose to use small groups to grow the church is right here. It starts with one of the most startling statements from the mouth of Jesus, in Luke 22... ***'Peter, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail and that when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers'***.

There's a saying: 'An army marches on its stomach'... There should be another saying like it: 'The Church marches through feasting on God in fellowship.' Not as snappy, I realise... But we know very well that we are in a spiritual battle, don't we?. And the only way to stay strong is to stick close to Jesus and stick close to each other. How did Peter strengthen his fellow believers? By spending time with them, reminding them of God's promises and by them praying together. This is the dynamic of any church small group – building the church by encouraging one another in following Jesus. Small groups enable us to share our ongoing walk with God & encourage us to share our faith with others beyond church. The scripture: 'Do not be afraid, God is near' is best realised in a small group, with your fellow believers gathered round in a prayer circle.

I realise setting up small groups is far from being a silver bullet. It will not instantly 'solve' all Carey's problems overnight, or even over months. As we can see, it was easy, even after being with Jesus for three years, for the 12 disciples to fall out with each other. But the ultimate aim of forming more small groups at Carey is to show us the blessings of following Jesus - and to draw us closer to one another. It will undeniably get us closer to Jesus' original concept of the church. And it will build us in faith, hope & love, to be a more effective witness to Christ in our community. If we take time to develop a fully worked out vision, this will be a long-term strategy for growing our faith & growing God's church.

We want to be close to Jesus & Jesus' vision for the church don't we? Let me finish with a reflection on what it means to be close to Jesus... Always close to Peter (and even closer to Jesus) was John. At the Last Supper, John leant against the breast of Jesus & felt his heart-beat. John was possibly the youngest disciple. Therefore, arguably in the words of Jesus, the greatest of the disciples:

‘the greatest among you should be like the youngest’. There is no mention of John here in this part of John 13 & he hardly features much in the rest of the gospel. Other disciples are often fore-grounded in John’s gospel. Yet, John *is* mentioned as being at the foot of the cross with the female disciples, unlike the other male disciples, it would seem. And so, Jesus entrusts his mother, Mary, to the care of John. More than that, there is John’s claim to be the ‘beloved disciple’. In his own words, ***‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’***.

If anything seemed most likely to cause a dispute with the other disciples it might be this claim. Only... ***it was not ever intended as an exclusive claim***. It never became a part of this dispute about who was the ‘greatest disciple’. The disciples would have felt very foolish to have been found out arguing amongst themselves. But they would never have been so foolish to dispute which of them Jesus loved the most. This dispute wasn’t about that. It was about which one of them possessed most key leadership attributes... How insecure those disciples continued to be in trying to ‘impress’ Jesus. They were all still trying to win his approval as ‘greatest’ & therefore his best choice as successor...

I think what John is doing with this simple description of himself as the ‘beloved disciple’, is to undercut all that bravado & point-scoring. I believe this is the case, partly from what other commentators have said. John was simply saying that the greatest, most memorable thing about me - is that Jesus loves me... (just as he loves everyone else). He was saying, ‘this is the most significant claim I can make about myself, which trumps everything else that is true of me.’ This is indeed The Greatest Miracle...

Arguably the leading theologian of the 20th century was Karl Barth. He wrote a library of theology called ‘Church Dogmatics’. It took us two years at Spurgeons College to study just one of these books of his. Barth was once asked by a journalist: ‘What is the greatest insight of your theology...?’ He stopped & looked at the journalist. And then started singing: ‘Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so’... Which also reminds me of arguably the greatest evangelist of the last century. Billy Graham. On one of his Mission England trips, people tried to draw him into a dispute between the Catholic & the Protestant wings of the church. You can imagine that he graciously & wisely swerved that one. But then a journalist challenged him by demanding: ‘What makes you think you can come here to England, a rich, American evangelist & preach to us?’ Billy gave him one of those winsome, trademark smiles & simply

said: ***'I am what I am by the grace of God'...*** That's being close to Jesus. That's being secure in the love of Jesus, and in the company of others...

Thanks be to God for the Greatest Miracle – of God's love for each of us; God's love for his people, as they seek to follow Jesus; God's love for all people & all creation! Alleluia !