

# Sermon – Journeys of Discipleship

## Gospel: John 16:16–24

First of all, let me thank you for the privilege of being here today; the welcome you have given me over the past weeks has been fabulous.

I wonder if I have what it takes to be a disciple. Today's Gospel sits within a series of readings in which Jesus sets out his requirements for discipleship. We have heard recently of the Good Shepherd who tends to the needs and protection of a flock and the need for the disciple to live in Christ and to do Christ's work. We can hear, in narrative form, the two great commandments. We can also hear the need for journey and journeys imply departure and destination.

In today's Gospel Jesus seeks to cement the disciple's understanding that he is about to depart and that responsibility for his mission is being passed to them. Despite Jesus' programme of progressive and gentle revelation, disciples remain confused; and who can blame them? The mission Jesus offers is at once confusing and challenging. Jesus' ministry is the vision of a social order of revolutionary proportion that it can barely be imagined by his disciples. An order that so threatens Jesus' enemies they seek and obtain his blood as a result.

Jesus focuses on his imminent departure telling the disciples that his place, his destination is with the Father. Jesus' journey on this earth is complete and a new era is about to commence. In the first half of John 16 – which we did not read today - Jesus has explained he needs to leave in order that this new era, involving the gift to us of the Holy Spirit, can commence. Jesus foretells the sequence of his death and resurrection (not for the first time), and warns the disciples that his final journey will be both sad and joyous for them.

*A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.*

He also points forward to his ascension to his right place with the Father, our particular celebration this Thursday, and then the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost when the age of the 'between times' will be instituted; that is the time in which Jesus' first century disciples and we, Jesus' current day disciples must live. It is the period between the physical presence of God on earth and the end time when Jesus will return.

It is in this between times that disciples make their journey; it is the mission to which they have been called and in which Jesus' vision of a new social order is to be proclaimed. From their confused questions and apparent incomprehension, we know it is not clear quite what the implications are except that this journey will be both difficult and sad as well as joyful. As always with Jesus, paradoxes abound.

I travel a bit for my work. As a consultant I am sent around Australia and sometimes overseas. It can be hard work and it's certainly not glamorous. I have spent more time in airports than I care to remember. When I think of travel I think of what I have to pack. Packing light is the ideal but I am not very good at that. I also think of what I must leave behind – my family and home, my familiar surroundings. Sometimes my Church if it is a long trip. I think of being alone in a strange place. And there is always the threat of lost baggage! Sometimes I have travelled to places where the social rules are different. The locals may drive on the other side of the road – like the US, speak different languages – like Indonesia.

The cultural rules may be unusual even interesting – eating only with the right hand at table – as in Malaysia; paying tips – in Singapore; standing still in the street at 9 in the morning while the national anthem is played – Thailand; In New Zealand going to a dairy instead of a milk bar and in Adelaide queuing for a bus. Travel can be good.

I also think of the destination. What will I find there? How different will it be? Maybe it will be exciting; new people; new ways of doing things. Sometimes there is a souvenir I can take home. I now try never to point with my fingers, rather I use my thumb – after living in Malaysia for a couple of years it still seems rude to point.

Jesus sends his disciples to a new destination where the local rules are different. The new rules are a social order that is conditioned by the journey Jesus is about to make through the Cross. Jesus' sacrifice will confront the old rules of this world's order and call out their inconsistencies, their partiality, their violence, their injustice. He will refuse every opportunity to give in to them.

For this, because it threatens the current order, Jesus will be hung on the Cross and killed. We will have a New rule – sacrificial love for others.

Jesus will rise from the tomb three days later. New rule – the grave is not the end, but the beginning.

Jesus will Ascend to the Father. New rule – there is a place, a destination, for us in a Kingdom we cannot now comprehend.

Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to us. New rule – we are not alone, we have a fellow traveller.

In order to undertake this journey disciples need to travel light. There is no need for the impedimenta of this world. Some have already abandoned their normal occupations. Some may have left their families. They need to travel to strange places and they need to engage with people who are foreign to them. They have to resist the temptation to return to the familiarity of the old life. They are asked to carry a message that confronts the familiarity and security of the world they have rejected. That message is not welcome because it threatens the vested interests of the old order, of often quite powerful people. And for this expect to be taunted, ridiculed, abused, beaten, and, sometimes, killed.

How can this dismal prospect be worth it? What is it about this destination that is better than 'home' - where we live now? The prospect for this new place is all of those new rules Jesus died for.

Sacrificial love (or agape or charity) – the preference for another person's welfare over one's own; the good Samaritan.

Equality – Where the Gentiles and Jews are one – the breaking of distinctions between people under God on arbitrary categories that are no more than prejudice.

The capacity for unqualified forgiveness – prodigal fathers forgiving prodigal sons.

Capacity to let go of worldly concerns and submit to trust in God's generosity - the jar of oil that does not empty or a few loaves and a couple of fish among thousands.

To distrust human reasoning as the only basis for intelligent inquiry – miracles that confound rational explanation.

That is what this new social order is all about.

And yet disciples are required to maintain the faith in these ideals in the face of inexplicable misery – natural disasters, the death of children, unrelieved and seeming unrelievable poverty, and of cruelty between humans because this ideal surpasses our rational capacity to explain it and our courage to do it.

Jesus promised to be with his disciples on the journey. He promised to send the Holy Spirit to be that fellow traveller. Finally, he instituted the body of Christ centred on the Eucharist to be the vehicle in which we are prepared and fed and inspired for the journey.

Do I have what it takes to be a disciple? Do you? Can we complete this journey of discipleship, to reject the old rules of this comfortable world, to reject selfishness, violence and inequity, to replace them with sacrifice, peace and generous equality. To be despised and rejected because we will point out the inadequacies and inconsistencies of the old rules. Are we prepared for what we must leave behind. Can we see with clarity the destination and all it offers for us? This journey will be tough but we have the fellow traveller and we have the community of the Eucharist to be our sustenance, rest and comfort on the way that Jesus has shown us. We will die on this journey but we will die to this world and be born in another destination we cannot now imagine.

Its time to go. **Amen**

