

A Sermon Preached at Choral Evensong

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The Dean of Newcastle, The Very Reverend Dr James Rigney



The ninth chapter of Luke's gospel is an amalgam of stories; illustrating the way in which the gospels are constructed from pericopes – stories strung together like pearls on a string.

Here we find the Lukan version of the feeding of the multitude is followed by the challenge to the disciples to affirm Jesus and then by Jesus' teaching about the challenges of discipleship. What might be the string on which these stories are strung? Perhaps it lies in Jesus' response to the dilemma in which the disciples find themselves.

The disciples are men and women who live in the reflected glory of Jesus – sometimes this is a comfortable place to be. We saw this in the gospel this morning.

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

At other times their proximity to Jesus brings nothing but confusion and frustration.

We have probably all experienced a situation that has got out of hand: perhaps a meeting or a conversation that has developed in unexpected directions over which we seem to have lost control. The disciples have had this experience. It has been exciting for them to have people flock around Jesus. Then suddenly it becomes problematic.

The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, 'Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place.'

Jesus' response to their dilemma is to choose not to perform for them:

But he said to them, 'You give them something to eat.'

Jesus asks of them something seemingly impossible, but the challenge is based on the idea that at some point we need to step up to the responsibilities of discipleship. We can enjoy what we see as the benefits of faith – but unless we exercise the responsibilities of faith; which in this case is to envisage or imagine that we could do remarkable things in and through the grace of God we are taking the easy way out.

The miracle of the feeding of the multitude shows that when believers become partners with Jesus in the execution of His mission, He can enable them to provide greater blessing for others than they can by themselves.

Likewise when Jesus asks the disciples 'Who do the crowds say that I am?' he asks those who are closest to him to express an understanding of who he is and what his ministry is that is different from the view held by the uncommitted crowd.

He asks them to distinguish themselves at a profound level from those who follow Jesus out of a shallow and misplaced interest.

He asks them to do so by daring to identify him with their deepest religious desire: 'The Messiah of God'.

Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke does not locate this episode at Caesarea Philippi. Instead Luke links it to the feeding of the five thousand. He wants to show the challenge to the disciples to interpret the miracle in its fullest sense and to see their part in it as a way of their understanding who Jesus is.

The imagery of cross-bearing powerfully illuminates what is entailed by allegiance to Christ. It encourages sacrificial discipleship, self-denial, but above all it is a call to identification with Christ, a call to allegiance. The challenge delivered to the disciples and to us is whether we are we willing to accept the shame of following a crucified messiah? Eternal life is found in our identification with and belief in Christ, the rejected and suffering one.

The disciples knew Jesus was the Messiah, but it was not enough to know who he was, they had to commit themselves to him, give their allegiance to him. He was about to undertake a wilderness journey that would destroy him, but would inevitably lead to glory. They had to decide whether they would accept the shame of identifying with a crucified messiah.

Jesus tells the disciples not to say anything of who he was to avoid a premature or incomplete understanding of his identity and mission. Those who would fully understand who he is must walk with him through the wilderness and follow him to the cross; accepting the responsibilities and challenges of discipleship.