

Sermon: Being Disciples – Holiness

We are now in our 4th week of working our way through the book, *Being Disciples*, by Rowan Williams. For those that may have missed out on what we have covered so far or just want a reminder, in week 1 we looked at what it meant to be a disciple: to be expectant that Jesus is working in our lives and hearts and to increase our awareness to ways in which he might be teaching us. I found that a really powerful message, and since reading about it and hearing Linda's sermon, I have been more expectant and aware. And this has been positive for my daily walk with Christ. I hope it has been for you too.

In Week 2, we looked at forgiveness, using the image of our daily bread. The way in which forgiveness nourishes us as individuals and as a community of believers. How we feed and nourish each other's humanity by offering and accepting forgiveness.

Then last week, we looked at Faith, Hope and Love, and that despite our doubts, questions and fear, God does not let us go. That we are sustained in hope and love by His faithfulness. So that brings us to today when we are reflecting on Holiness.

Please pray with me: Holy Father, may the words that I speak be of you and may we be expectant to hear what you might teach us, as you draw us closer to you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

How often do you see something that just makes you stop and stare? That takes your breath away? That makes you say WOW!

Did anyone see the moon this week? I was just going to bed on Thursday night and I went into the kitchen where the lights were off and looked out the window. And my goodness – the moon was spectacular. So bright and I could see it so clearly. I just stood there for probably 10 mins or so in the dark, just watching the moon rise over the hills. There were little clouds in the sky and they would sometimes pass in front of the moon and be illuminated by its light. I thought about what colours I would use to paint this scene. The sky was black, the clouds grey and blue against the night sky, but with the moon behind them there were also oranges and yellows around the edges of these delicate clouds. It was just breathtaking. This week I have also been sorting through holiday photos on my computer. Cathedrals featured in a number of these photos, particularly a beautiful cathedral high on the hill in Lyon, France, and St Paul's Cathedral in London. Similar to the feeling of looking at the moon this week, I remember feeling in awe as I walked into St. Paul's cathedral. I think my neck became sore from looking up in wonder. Cathedrals, such as St Pauls, are resplendent in beauty, crafted over long periods of time by people devoted to God. They were dedicated to God and called Holy. These buildings were set apart for the purpose of worshiping God and in themselves, can point us to God and his holiness.

"Be holy, because I am holy" What a statement! What do you think of when you hear these words? When you think of holiness?

Does it make you think of Genesis 2, where we read that *"... God blessed the seventh day and made it **holy**, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done."*

Or does holiness make you think of the story of God appearing to Moses, from the burning bush, saying" ⁵ *"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are*

standing is holy ground.” This caused Moses to hide his face, because he was afraid to look at God.” (Exodus 3:5,6)

Or is it Isaiah’s vision of the Temple of God in Isaiah 6?

6 ... , I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

And we also have numerous, very detailed descriptions of different parts of the Temple, the place where God dwelt with the Israelites. As well as the temple itself, many of the components within the temple were described as Holy. This would have links to how we think of churches and different things inside them as holy today.

There can be some descriptions of God’s holiness in the Old Testament that we might find scary or strange. But Holiness was a way of describing the character of God, it is one of the words that God uses to describe himself. The word Holy was used to mean set apart for God. It could be something that is ‘belonging to God’, or something ‘of God.’ Or simply God himself.

We can then think through the New Testament, where holy or holiness is used. Paul commonly addresses the churches he writes to as God’s Holy people. He also urges them to be holy in his encouragements and exhortations.

Also, In Luke 1:35 when the angel is talking to Mary, he says the following. “...“**The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the **holy** one to be born will be called the Son of God.**” Here we have the word holy being used to describe Jesus.

And then if we then go to a dictionary, we see that sanctification, is the process through which we as disciples, as people set apart for God, are made holy. That is more like God, more like Jesus.

So what do all these examples of the use of holy lead me to understand? Well, that if someone or something is holy, it is of God, for God or belonging to God. Because God is holy.

As I thought further in trying to define holy or holiness, what came to my mind was the Holy Spirit. 1 of the 3 members of the Trinity. You may have heard the mention of the Holy Spirit as the angel was speaking to Mary. In our reading today from 2 Corinthians, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth and explaining how the Holy Spirit works within the New Covenant, the relationship between God and all people, brought into being through Jesus. Paul contrasts how in the old testament Moses would put a veil over his face, after speaking with God, as his face was radiant from the glory and holiness of the Lord. In vs 15, which just precedes the reading we heard it says that “*Whenever Moses is read a veil lies over [the Israelites’] hearts*”. However, with Christ that veil is removed. And in vs 18, we read that “*And we all, with unveiled face,*

beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

Some versions use the word beholding, others reflecting. I believe beholding gets the point the Paul is making more fully - it is about being captivated or being caught up in adoration.

So beholding, or being captivated by the Glory of The Lord, we are transformed to become more and more like him, from one degree of glory to another.

But how do we know what the glory of the God looks like?

We see God's glory in creation – the moon this week was a reminder of that. But how else? Paul goes on in Chapter 4 to say *"For God, who said "let light shine out of darkness", has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ".* (2 Cor 4:6) So Paul is referencing back to Genesis and saying that God the creator, reveals his glory in Jesus.

And again in Hebrews 1:3 *"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."*

Jesus gives glory to the Father. And we can see this glory of God, in Jesus submitting to the will of the Father by dying on the cross. Through Jesus offering God's magnificent grace. And through being raised from the dead and drawing all people to himself. Jesus is The Holy Lamb of God, and He points us to God.

So when we are thinking about holiness, about becoming more holy, what is the Holy Spirit doing? If we look again at vs 18, it says *"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."* It is the Holy Spirit that is transforming us to become like God.

When I am trying to understand something that I read in the Bible, as well as praying about it, the study notes in my Bible are good at directing my thoughts. In talking about the Holy Spirit, my ESV bible notes state that *"The Spirit continually points to the beauty and wonder of the Son so that people will be drawn to Him, become like Him and point others to Him as well. I'll say that again: "The Spirit continually points to the beauty and wonder of the Son so that people will be drawn to Him, become like Him and point others to Him as well." ... Humans become like what they adore. The Spirit works to foster adoration of Christ so that people will become like him."* Pg 2521 ESV

So the Spirit allows us to behold and adore Christ, and in doing so, we are made like Him. We are made Holy. This process of being made holy is called sanctification, and I think that is the essence of what it means to be a Christian. Being Disciples is an active phrase. Sanctification, or becoming more holy is a process. In our 1 Peter reading, it states, *² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation."* It is an active process. A growing process. And further down in vs 5, *⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a*

spiritual house^[d] to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. “ This process of being made holy, of being made like Christ, flows from beholding or adoring Christ. And this happens by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Rowan Williams states that “Becoming holy is being so taken over by the extraordinaries of God that *that* is what you are interested in, and that is what radiates from you to reflect to other people.” Pg 53. Taken over by the extraordinaries, taken over by the brilliance, the glory of Christ, we can not help but reflect or radiate that to others.

This process of becoming more holy, becoming more like God, is our life long task. Whilst the steps to do this aren't always straight forward, we can see the outcomes. After meeting with a holy person, the landscape looks a bit different. And a holy person, doesn't say, look at me, but rather look at Jesus. They are comfortable in knowing their place in the Father's heart and they wish for you to know your place in the Father's heart too.

Holy people can help shape our view of God. Think of David in the Psalms, where he tells us about the magnificence of God. That helps to shape our view of him. It is like a personal recommendation. I sometimes struggle to get excited when other people praise God, such as David in the Psalms, or in a worship song, but I now understand the effect of having a personal recommendation from someone you trust. And how that influences your own view point. But I learnt this in a strange way, and of course, being me, I learnt this lesson through food.

Last year I was talking to a friend at work about fruit. She loves blueberries. She would bring a punnet to work many days and eat them. Never, cold from the fridge, they always had to be at room temperature. So I assumed they were her favourite fruit. I was shocked to discover that in fact, apricots are her favourite fruit. I thought, sure I like apricots, but then she went on to describe them. Her eyes lit up and her joy increased. They are just perfect, a beautiful colour, slight fur on the outside, and then when they are perfectly ripe they are just incredible. You can just eat so many of them (within reason) and they are just the best. Well I went away from that conversation and thought a lot about apricots. About how they are simply excellent. A perfectly ripe apricot is just a delicacy. Or those that aren't yet at peak ripeness, you can chargrill them, or bake them into a tart or cake. And it is just heavenly. With a dollop of cream on the side and you are in for a happy afternoon tea. Then I of course, had to buy some and experience them afresh for myself.

And so that is when I realised, that when someone speaks with a genuine passion, and real love for something, in this case, apricots, or in our context, in adoration of Jesus, we begin to see him afresh and wish to experience him afresh. We can't help but adore him anew. Holy people do this. They are so captivated by Jesus, that they tell others about him. But even more so they show others about Jesus. They show others the love that God has for them. For all people, no matter their story. And this is in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

So my question is, how as God's people are we helping others to adore Jesus? How are we pointing others towards God in a genuine, life giving way? Does it flow out of our being as a result of us being captivated by Christ? There is a poet I follow on Instagram called Tess Guinery, and she shared this quote on Friday “Keep your eyes lifted high upon the sun – and you'll see the best light in everyone.” If we are called to be holy people and love others and in doing so

point them to Christ – then Jesus needs to be the focus of our attention. If you are struggling to be captivated by Christ, meditate on the stories of Jesus in the Gospels, and pray that the Holy Spirit might help you. What request would God want to grant more than this?

That is on an individual level, but what does it mean for the church, the bride of Christ to be holy?

Again, Rowan Williams suggests that “...the truly holy church is taken over by the excitement of the extraordinaries of God; it wants to talk about the beauty and splendour of God, and to show the self-draining, self-forgetting love of God by being at the heart of humanity, by being where people are most human.” I think we as a church can often get distracted, get off message, and struggle with the culture in which we exist. There are challenges, definitely, but maybe we need to focus again on the holiness of God.

What would the world around us look like if churches were overtaken by the extraordinaries of God? How would we be talking about the beauty and splendour of God? How would we be loving others? How would we be helping people to see themselves as God sees them?

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
1 Peter 2:9.

We, as in all of creation, are God’s special possession. The Holy Spirit helps us to see God for who he really is, and who we really are. And of course, who we are is precious to God. I read Isaiah 43 recently, and it says “... *you are precious in my eyes, and honoured, and I love you...*”

As you fix your eyes on Christ, may you be captivated by His submission to the will of the Father, enthralled by the love and extravagant grace of God, and in reflecting on these things, may the Holy Spirit continue to transform you and make you holy. That you may radiate this message of hope to all those you meet.

Amen.

Blessing:

Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him. (The Message, 2 Cor 3: 17-18)

As we move forward in lent, towards the cross, May the Holy Spirit be welcomed afresh into your lives, pointing you in adoration towards the Son. And may you be captivated by Jesus’ glory, giving praise and honour to our Father in Heaven and being transformed in holiness.

Amen

Readings:

2 Corinthians 3:17-18

¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate^[a] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

1 Peter 1:13- 2:5

Be Holy

¹³ Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵ But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."^[a]

¹⁷ Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. ¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰ He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. ²¹ Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

²² Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.^[b] ²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For,

"All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures forever."^[c]

And this is the word that was preached to you.

² Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

The Living Stone and a Chosen People

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house^[d] to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.