

## Sermon - *Being disciples*

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Athelstone Uniting Church #57  
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**Text:** John 1:1-8, 1: 36-39

### Pray

Please pray with me:

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Holy Spirit,  
that in your light, we may see light,  
in your truth, find freedom,  
and in your will, discover our peace;

through Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

### Bird watching

Since moving to Athelstone I have been captivated by the bird life. Whether it is because the manse and my office have better positioning to be able to see the birds or whether there are *more* birds here, I can't tell – but they *have* got my attention.

Last year I heard about the *Aussie Backyard Bird Count*

It's a week in October when any one can Count the birds that we see in our garden within a 20 minutes time period

and the organisers even provide an App to help

did anyone here participate in it last October?

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<sup>1</sup> Prayers from *Uniting in Worship 2*

Well, to be able to count, you need to know what to look for.. so the app has a field guide so you can look up the birds and become familiar with how they look and where to expect to find them.

The more I paid attention, the more birds I noticed. And not just number but the variety

And I learned so much

The crow is not a crow – it's a little raven

And the murray magpie is actually a magpie lark

And there are heaps of different varieties of rosellas and lorikeets

and I needed to slow myself right down and be still so that the birds would not be frightened away – and so that I could hear them and see them.

In October I did the bird count. I don't remember now how many birds I counted, but there were at least 7 varieties of birds in the manse backyard at that time

And you know, since then I have noticed even more varieties – in different seasons other birds seem to emerge – and different birds like to hang out in different parts of the garden – so we see new Holland honey eaters out the back, rosellas out the front and sometimes wrens out the side.

I have learned to recognise their looks, their sounds and their behaviours.

So, next October, I wonder if I might spot more than 7 varieties – simply because I have become more attentive and more aware of the birds in my backyard?

## Lent

We are about to move into a new season in the church – a season we call Lent.

In this season, my hope is that together we will become more attentive to Jesus, so that we will discover more about what God is like.

It is a season when we'll be reflecting on what it means to *be* disciples ...

## **'Being Disciples' by Rowan Williams.**

And the way we're doing that is through Rowan Williams' book, Being Disciples.

Why this book?

I discovered it last year when Craig Mitchell highlighted it as a good resource for Lent. Craig has served in many roles in the Uniting Church – his passion has always been to help Christians to grow in their faith through Christian education and discipleship. He has recently been awarded his PhD with a particular focus on Christian discipleship – so when he recommended the book, it got my attention.

Last year, Craig began to develop some resources inspired by this book, and has kindly shared some of them with me and given me permission to adapt them for this series.

Rowan Williams' book itself was not written as a Lenten study, however its theme of discipleship is about learning to *be* and *do* that to which followers of Jesus are called.

## **Rowan Williams**

Professor Rowan Williams, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury for 10 years, is a church statesman and one of the UK's leading theologians. For most of his career Rowan Williams combined his theological teaching and study with a concern for pastoral care.

The chapters of the book are based upon addresses that Professor Williams gave between 2007 and 2012.

So through the next few weeks we'll be looking at his thoughts on Being Disciples, Forgiveness, Faith, hope and love, Holiness, Faith in society, and Life in the spirit

I encourage you to consider purchasing your own copy of the book.

I have a few here today for \$13 – or contact Sharyn during Office hours for more information.

If you want to go deeper, there are Discussion Questions available to be used after reading each chapter. There are some in the book

plus

I have collated a new resource with content from Brian Ball, Dean Brook and Dean Pearce. This was emailed out last week. Again, ask Sharyn if you would like a printed copy.

And ..I want to emphasise that they make a lot more sense when you've read the book!

A huge thanks to these 'sages' in our midst – Brian, Dean and Dean - for providing us with material for us to reflect on.

Now, I don't expect you to agree with everything you read – in the book – or in the resources provided – in fact I'm hoping that there will be things you will want to engage with. Reflecting, talking and debating things like this help us to grow!

## Disciples

As we begin this series it is good to reflect on what a Christian disciple is.

On Wednesday a new small group met for the first time at the manse

We talked about how we would define a Christian disciple

Here's what came out of the conversation:

A Christian disciples is

Someone who follows Jesus

Someone who tries to emulate Jesus' teachings

A Follower and a learners – someone who takes it on and takes it in

An Evangelist

An Apprentice

A Supporters

And a friend of Jesus

Wow, all that came out of a brainstorming session – before we've even started working through the book!

I wonder how you would have answered that question? Perhaps this is something you can reflect on this week?

Quoting Craig Mitchell, "to be a disciple is to be a follower of a less-travelled Way, an unfolding Truth and a compelling Life. Discipleship is about learning to follow - not just anyone, but a particular Master, Teacher, Healer, Messiah, Saviour - Jesus Christ."

So, my hope is that through this series we will be encouraged as Christian disciples and gain new insights into how Jesus is calling each of us to live

## Being disciples

And that's the key:

Discipleship is about how we *live* - not just the decisions we make, not just the things we believe, but a state of *being*....

Of being *aware and attentive*

Of being *with Jesus*

Just as important - if not more so - than the *doing* part of being a disciple!

It's very telling, Williams says, that at the very beginning of John's Gospel<sup>2</sup> when the 2 disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus they say, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Jesus says, 'come and see.' And they stay with him for the rest of the day. The gospel teaches us that the bottom line in thinking about discipleship has something to do with this 'staying'. Later on in the same Gospel (especially in John 15) the same language of 'staying' or 'abiding', as it is often translated is used again to describe the ideal relation of the disciple to Jesus: 'Abide in me' he says; 'abide in my love'<sup>3</sup>

In other words, continues Williams, what makes you a disciple is not turning up from time to time. Yes, discipleship can be translated from the Greek as being a student - but it doesn't mean turning up once a week for a course - or a sermon(!) - it's not something intermittent - it is a relationship that continues.

In the ancient world a student was actually more like that - they would hang on their teacher's every word, follow in their footsteps, sleep outside their door, wait for pearls of wisdom to fall from their lips, watch how their teacher behaved.

To be a student in the ancient world was to commit to living in the same atmosphere and breathing the same air - there was nothing intermittent about it at all!

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<sup>2</sup> John 1:38-39

<sup>3</sup> John 15:4,9

So to be a student or a disciple then can be seen as a state of being in which you are looking and listening without interruption. Hanging around, watching and absorbing a way of life you are starting to share. You learn by sharing life; you learn by looking and listening.

So Jesus words, 'Come and See', are an important invitation to us as we begin this season.<sup>4</sup>

Discipleship is a state of awareness – the disciple notices in order to be changed / transformed – so that the way they see and experience the world changes

Disciples are always expectant – they take it for granted that there is always something about to break through from the Master – something about to burst through the ordinary and uncover a new light on the landscape.

So a disciple's awareness is a little like a birdwatcher – sitting still, poised, alert, expectant that something extraordinary will suddenly burst into view.

Some say that *prayer* is a little like birdwatching – you sit very still because something is sure to burst into view – and sometimes – it means a long day of sitting, swatting flies, with nothing else very much happening..

Perhaps your experience of prayer is like that..

But occasionally when you do see the flash of a blue wren – it makes it all worthwhile..

Williams says that living in that kind of expectancy – living in awareness, your eyes sufficiently open and your mind both relaxed and attentive enough to see that when it happens – is basic to discipleship.<sup>5</sup>

Our experience today of discipleship is so different to that of the disciples who followed Jesus' footsteps.

We have the Holy Spirit to lead us, to guide us, to energise our awareness and to kindle our expectancy. So, like those first disciples, we look and listen. We watch with expectancy the world in which we live. We listen for the Word to come alive for us in Scripture.

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<sup>4</sup> Previous section is from chapter 1 (pages 1-3)

<sup>5</sup> Previous section is from chapter 1 (pages 4-5)

We look to one another with expectancy – asking what is Christ giving me through this person, this group? Not always easy when we don't always agree! But Jesus has brought us together so that we can have kind of expectancy of each other. It doesn't mean we will necessarily agree with everything other Christians say or do – but it does mean we can begin by asking: What is Jesus giving me here and now through this person?

So to be a disciple is to abide with Jesus - to stay with him, to pay attention to him, to expect to learn from him.

Another aspect of abiding with – or being with Jesus – is that by being close to Jesus, we are close to God.

The gospel of John opens with the beautiful image of the Word being with God right from the beginning – this close intimate relationship.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
He was with God in the beginning

They have always been with each other - the closest of relationships..

John said, 'where Jesus is, is close to the Father's heart'<sup>6</sup>

And Jesus said, 'where I am, there will be my servant also'<sup>7</sup>

Where Jesus is – we are to be also – and that puts us close to the Father's heart.

When we draw near to Jesus, we are drawn close to the Father – God's glory is revealed.

There is a connection in John's gospel between the way in which the disciples are to see and do what their Master is doing – and what Jesus sees in relation to the Father.

Jesus said in John 5:19-20:

"Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father

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<sup>6</sup> John 1:18

<sup>7</sup> John 12:26)

loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed.

That is the kind of relationship we are invited to - Jesus reveals how wonderful our God is and we get to join in with the amazing works God does, empowered by the Spirit.

So, to draw some of this together:

A Christian disciple spends time in the company of Jesus

How?

By spending time with other Christians

By reading about Jesus in the Scriptures

By spending time with Father Son and Spirit in prayer

By being willing to be open to learn and grow and transform so that we can be Christ for others

To do this a Christian disciple tries to take on the inner stillness of a birdwatcher – attentive and expectant – putting aside our own concerns and being open to see that flash of inspiration – to seeing what God is giving us through Jesus.

I pray that you will learn to be attentive and expectant – growing closer in your relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

Amen