

## **“WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN?”**

### **1. Christian is a Noun not an Adjective**

*Acts 11:19-30*

Well, the end of this lockdown is at least in sight, even if it does still seem quite a way away. Eventually, though, we will emerge from it all and there is no doubt that we will all be changed in some way. The things which have happened to us will have had their effect, as will the things that have happened to those close to us. We will have had perhaps more time to reflect on things and no doubt we will have faced up to all sorts of questions about the way we live our lives and the part our faith has to play in it all. For some, that faith will have been strengthened, for others it may have been profoundly shaken. But how will we emerge from all this? What will be our priorities? Where has our faith taken us? What are we going to do – individually and collectively? Or, perhaps more importantly, what are we going to be?

Like many of you, I’ve read quite a lot over the past year or so, and come across some stuff that has made me think quite hard. I think I mentioned in an article in *Vision* a couple of months ago a book I’d been sent in connection with a ministers’ conference: it was called *The Sound of Life’s Unspeakable Beauty* and the author is a German violin maker who used reflections on his craft as a means of thinking about his faith. The foreword was by a Japanese-American artist, Makoto Fujimura, who uses traditional Japanese techniques to create great abstract expressionist canvasses – and who is also the director of Fuller Theological Seminary’s Centre for Worship, Theology and the Arts. I tracked down a couple of his books and found them thought-provoking and enjoyable. In one of them – *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for Our Common Life* – a particular passage really clicked for me. (And, strangely, someone, quite independently, also sent me a quotation from a US rapper which says almost exactly the same thing.) Let me just read you a couple of paragraphs (*Culture Care* pp84/5).

What he is saying there is that being a Christian is to do with our identity not our activity, to do with our whole life not just a particular lifestyle. Ever since the situation we’ve just read about in first century Antioch, the followers of Jesus, the disciples, have been known as “Christians”. That is clearly a noun: it is what they were. It is not an adjective, something that described them but wasn’t the core thing. They weren’t Christian businessmen or Christian market traders or Christian housewives or Christian fishermen. Basically, they found their identity in Christ. That continues to be the case for us twenty centuries later: our identity is in Christ, not in what we do, in what we are told to be, in what we try to construct for ourselves.

Now, that’s a challenge, because it needs to affect our lives in every way, and that can seem a tall order. But it’s also an encouragement, because it means we are safe in Christ and we can rely on him in every circumstance. There’s a lot in this if we are really to allow it to make a difference to us day by day, so over the next few weeks we’re going to try and unpack it a bit, to reflect on what it means for us and how we

actually allow it to become a reality for us. We're going to ask ourselves the question which is the title of this little series, "*What kind of Christian?*" What do we really think we're about if we call ourselves Christians? The material will also be available for the housegroups, so if you want to continue to discuss it further, now might be the time to join one if you haven't already.

This morning, though, we're going to have a look at that sentence we have just read from *Acts 11* – "*The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch*" – and think about some of the basics here. This is the first recorded use of the word "*Christian*" and most scholars would tell you that it was originally a nickname, most likely a term of abuse, used to identify those who lived and worshipped in a particular way. Luke tells us that it was "*the disciples*" who were first called Christians – the first clue in our search to find out what a Christian really is. But then we need to ask, of course, what is a disciple?

Now, as far as Christians go, a disciple is someone who follows Christ. Many teachers in the ancient world – and still in many parts of the world today – had their disciples – people who learned from them and lived with them, ensuring that what they learned was actually put into practice. The New Testament gives us plenty of information about Jesus Christ's disciples and just to provide a kind of starting point for all this, I want to look at three particular characteristics of the disciples, the Christians, that we need to continue to take seriously today.

### **CHOSEN**

The first thing we need to establish is that disciples are **chosen**, not volunteers. As Jesus began his ministry in Palestine, he called people to him and they responded to his call. No-one can simply volunteer to become a Christian: although it may seem as if we volunteer, what we are actually doing is responding to the irresistible call of Christ. We see the examples of Peter, James, John, Matthew and the others and hear Jesus' words to them in *John 15:16*, "*You did not choose me. I chose you.*"

None of us is in a position to offer ourselves to God for his use just like that. But all of us can respond in obedience as Jesus calls. And, as so often is the case with all this kind of thing, that involves both an **encouragement** and a **challenge**.

It's an **encouragement** because it means that if God calls us, he will keep us. If the initiative is God's, it can never change. Listen to these words of Jesus, using the analogy of a shepherd and his sheep in *John 10:27-30*:

*"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."*

Once we have heard God's call and responded – by acknowledging our need of him, by acknowledging that Jesus died for us, and by acknowledging the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives – then we are ultimately safe for eternity.

But it's also challenging because it means that as we're not volunteers, we don't set the terms, God does. Many people did come and volunteer to be Jesus' disciples, but they wanted to join him on their terms and Jesus made it very clear that he set the terms. Look at *Luke 9:57-62*:

*As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'*  
*Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'*

*He said to another man, 'Follow me.'*

*But he replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'*

*Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'*

*Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.'*

*Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'*

Or think of the story of the Rich Young Ruler in *Luke 18*.

There are plenty of people who call themselves Christians but like to think they're volunteers, that they've done God a big favour by becoming a Christians, and so they try to live the Christian life according to their rules, not God's. They do the things that are convenient and ignore the commands of Christ – the life of obedience which we mentioned last week – the things which upset the way they want to live their own lives. Which brings us to our second characteristic of disciples.

## **COMMITTED**

Jesus called his followers, his disciples, to be people who were completely committed, both **to him** and **to one another**. He was always emphatic that those who followed him, who would come to use his name as their identity, should do so wholeheartedly and single-mindedly. He had no time for the kind of Sunday Christians who lurk in many churches today, people with a long list of excuses why they cannot get involved in his work as he wants them to. And the commitment, as we've just said, has to be in two directions.

**a) Committed to Christ** When Jesus spoke to the crowds who were following him on one occasion, he said, "*whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple*" (*Luke 14:27*). Those who were going to become his disciples, who would be known as Christians, had to carry their cross. And this is nothing to do with that trite little saying we so often use, "*Oh well – we all have our cross to bear*". It's something far more radical. As we've so often noted, in Jesus' time the only people carrying crosses were going to be executed on them. In the context of Jesus' wider teaching – and of what we read in Paul's letters – it's a call to crucify ourselves, our old human nature and all the selfishness, pride, stubbornness

and disobedience, the insistence on our own personal freedoms. We cannot be Christians if we're not totally committed to Christ. And in order for that to become a reality, we must remember that we are to hold closely to his teaching, as he tells his disciples in *John 8:31,32*, "*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*"

b) **Committed to one another** It can sometimes be lonely and often difficult as we try to live out our Christian faith, as we try to be disciples worthy of the name "Christian". So God has given us one another – to encourage, to stimulate, to challenge, above all to love one another. As we have to remind ourselves so often, Jesus says that this love is to be the very hallmark of his disciples: "*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (*John 13:35*). The commitment that Christians show one another is to be an eloquent message to the world around us and we can all derive some encouragement from that mutual love and support. But you cannot be a Christian in isolation – don't be fooled into thinking that you don't need other Christians; nor, on the other hand, that they don't need you.

### **COMMISSIONED**

Not only were the disciples chosen and committed – they were also commissioned, they were given a task to accomplish. In *John 15:8* Jesus says, "*This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples*". Disciples, Christians, must be active. As we've already said, Christ has no time for Sunday Christians, nor for the armchair Christians who sit back, pontificating on what the Church should or shouldn't be doing, without getting involved themselves in some way – maybe by devoting themselves to prayer or communicating via the Internet if they are literally confined to their armchair. Our faith in Christ must be put into practice or we will not "*bear much fruit*". It's about being a Christian where you are, on your daily frontline, amongst your friends and family and colleagues and neighbours.

The fulfilling of this commission is vital to the continuation of the Church. According to Matthew, as we saw last week, Jesus' famous last words were an exhortation to get out and make some more disciples – "*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*". Yet even in that challenge there is a promise that he would always be with them – "*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*". How could that be? He was about to go back to heaven.

Luke tells us in *Acts 1:8* that the disciples were promised "*power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you*". That power is available to us as disciples, as Christians today. God never asks us to do anything without giving us the means and the resources and none of us watching this today has done any more than **begin** to experience the true depth of that power. If only we could really allow the Spirit's power to work within us – then we might really see what Christians are made of!

You have been chosen by Jesus Christ to be one of his disciples. He has made that possible through his death and resurrection. Are you prepared to commit yourself to that and to take up the commission he gives you? As we said earlier, “Christian” was originally a nickname given to those who were very obviously Christ’s disciples. Could that nickname be used of you? Are the people amongst whom you live and work aware that you are chosen, committed and commissioned? That is where your identity lies, so whether you are a plumber or a teacher or an artist or a pensioner or a cleaner or a preacher, you are first and foremost a Christian. Get on and live like it!

### **For reflection and discussion**

Do you describe yourself as Christian or as a Christian “something”? Does it make any difference?

Do you see yourself as volunteering to be a Christian or do you feel that there was a real call on your life – that you are chosen? What might that mean for our evangelism?

We might accept that we are committed to Christ, but do we put enough emphasis on being committed to each other? In what ways could we better express that commitment to each other?

How do we know if we are “bearing fruit”?

In your own situation, what would it