

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 14, June 2020

Prepare our hearts, O God, to hear your Word and obey your will. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Matthew 9:9-23; Genesis 18:1-15

Following Jesus

I love to watch movies. Nowadays I'm watching movies online more than at the cinema. Even so, I go to the cinema from time to time because the whole experience of watching the film is not the same as watching them at home. A documentary film, *The Biggest Little Farm* was one of the movies that I watched at the cinema last year. The film features the life of John Chester and his wife Molly as they acquired and established themselves on Apricot Lane Farms in Moorpark, California. They were not seasoned farmers, who used to have professional jobs in the city. For a few years, the urban life in LA at a small apartment with their dog was not possible as they faced eviction by the city council. One day they decided to quit their jobs in search of an alternative life that would guarantee a peaceful life with their beloved dog. The farm they had purchased with the help of many friends was an abandoned barren orchard where no grass could live.

One of many impressive scenes, at some stage, their farm was under attack by huge slugs a size of eggs. Every night the slugs consumed plants, fruits and grass. Despite the hard work to catch slugs by hand, they stuck to their rules. They wouldn't use any pesticide for the sake of the soil and plants. By the time they were about to give up, God had sent them a unique army consisted of ducks, owls and other animals that ate slugs. It was one of the most moving scenes in the film. Their efforts to revive the soil continued for many years and eventually they not only transformed their barren orchard into the paradise where the healthy ecosystem was working. Their farm also began to produce many more fruits and good things that were sought after by people onwards. It is a good analogy that explains what following Jesus involves. So today, we'll see who follow Jesus and why. Next, it will allow us think about how following Jesus shapes the life of the church on the analogy of the biggest little farm.

1. Following Jesus – who and why?

In the NT, the word 'follow - ἀκολουθέω *akoloutheō* is often used as a term for discipleship to Jesus. But it is also used for others who follow Jesus with various reasons. We can divide it into three categories: first, people follow Jesus when they are called by him. Second, people follow Jesus to find things with which they accuse him of offending the Law. Lastly, people follow Jesus to be healed, comforted, and restored. Matthew 9:9 describes how Matthew becomes to follow Jesus. As read, Matthew was a tax collector that was one of the jobs hated by the Jews as they were working for Romans. In v 10, Jesus even shared a table with his typical crowd, tax collectors and sinners. This table fellowship not only shows that Jesus regarded Matthew as his friends, but also it was an example of the lifestyle in the kingdom of God. Take one example. In the parable in Matthew 22:1-14, a king gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to call those who had been invited to the banquet. But they didn't come for various reasons. Disappointed, the king sent other servants again as the wedding was ready. This time, he ordered them to invite who were not worthy. So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. Even though the guests were not worthy, by being allowed to sit at the table with the king, the parable symbolically illustrates how God's redemptive work is operating through the Son. By being accepted in God's grace, Matthew became Jesus' follower, so did we.

While Jesus had a table fellowship at Matthew's house, the second group emerges in the scene. They also followed Jesus this far – not to become his disciples but to accuse him of his eating with sinners, which was one of the violations of the Law of all 613 commandments (*Mitzvot*). In Judaism, table fellowship was more than

food. To share the table with another person was making a social statement about yourself and your guest. Jesus understood what it meant socially to sit down and eat a meal with someone. So when he chose to eat with someone that was a part of the 'underclass', he was crossing a social boundary to meet their spiritual need.

Different from the Pharisees, Jesus said any harsh words to these identified sinners. Especially in Matthew, Jesus not once reproves sinners. His inaugural message is a call to repent (4:17), and he denounces the cities he has visited for failing to repent (11:20-21; 12:41). He pronounces a woe against the scribes and the Pharisees (ch. 23). For sinners, he does not demand their repentance even. He simply eats and drinks with them. It continued throughout his ministry, and it became one of the offences the Pharisees couldn't overlook.

Next, another group concerning the Law appears. This time, it is the disciples of John the Baptist. They raised an issue of fasting. Fasting plays important roles in Judaism, especially when it comes to the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Fasting is a vehicle for reflecting and repenting for your sins. While fasting, people ask God for forgiveness so their name can be enshrined in the book of life. To their questions, Jesus compared him as the bridegroom, and they had the wedding banquet. In doing so, he challenged the doubters and questioners to think about the real purpose of the law and its functions.

The third group is people who hear Jesus' healing ministry and come to him to be healed. A leader of the synagogue whose daughter had just died; and the woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. Their dire situations had made them come to Jesus, and their wishes were granted. As seen, following Jesus means that they – good or bad will encounter Jesus' extended hospitality. As if John and Molly endeavoured to revive the soil, in this extended hospitality in God's kingdom, the needy are filled and so are the questioners and doubters as the futile soil can embrace not only various plants but also the pests.

The life of the church as followers of Jesus

The church's life as the followers of Jesus includes all three of this. Making disciples can be compared to preparing the seeds to plant in the soil. We do it through the study of scripture, and maintaining the intimate relationship with Christ. In this pluralistic society, we need to be prepared for questions from others who may not share the same faith with us. Following Jesus is to know him intimately in our own time and space which is the prime task for all of us. It compares to reviving the soil. If the soil is strong and healthy, it endures any harms and attacks from the outside. In our story time, we heard a parable about sour grapes. The fox was hungry, and he tried everything to get it. But no use. In the end, the fox made an excuse to cover his inability so that he would not be disappointed. A similar thing easily happens when it comes to faith. Even before tasting it, people may judge the good news of Christ Jesus as one of many religious stories. But living the life of Christ in our lives simply on a daily basis, we are already responding to all the sceptics and doubters. So what was your answer to the question – 'Is there any other way the fox can have grapes?' One of the answers is that the generous farmer may leave a bunch of the sweetest grapes on a lower branch either by mistake or deliberately so that the fox may have it! We believe that the pest may also be loved by the farmer in God's kingdom, and we are the followers of this wonderful farmer. Amen!