

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 14th June 2020

Matthew 9: 35 – 10: 8 & Exodus 19: 2 – 8a

In the 21st century one of the most popular methods of teaching is role play. Role play is when students act out invented scenarios under the watchful eye of a tutor, teacher or examiner. Have you ever had to take part in a role play? I hate it. I am too self-conscious, I struggle to imagine the situation is real, I can't forget that the scenario isn't true. I hate role play.

Thankfully, role play isn't the only method of teaching. There's another that is becoming more popular. This other method involves observation and assessment. It is used often, for example, to train teachers in America. There, student teachers spend a lot of time watching the best teachers teach. Then they go into the classroom and start teaching under the watchful eye of those best teachers who feedback to the student teachers what they are doing right or wrong before carrying out an assessment to fail the poor and pass the best.

No role play is involved in this teaching method, just observation by students, followed by practice under the encouraging eye of an experienced teacher. Or, to put it in more technical language the teaching method is: calibrate, practice, coach and assess. Calibrate – that is the observation; practice – that is doing the job; coach – that is the encouragement; assess – that is pass or fail. This technique doesn't work in all cases. Although a trainee pilot may have observed her senior colleague flying a plane many times, the five hundred passengers on board her maiden flight probably hope that she has also role played flying in a flight simulator before being let loose in the cockpit.

Aside from obvious examples like that, surgery being another, the teaching technique of observation, practice and assessment works well. It works, for example, if you want to teach doctors good bedside manners; or ministers how to preach; or managers how to manage. And, it involves no role play; thank God - literally.

God didn't use role play when he taught his people how to live. Instead, he gave us the best example to observe and, as we read in the Gospel this morning, after they had observed how he did it, Jesus sent his disciples out to practice on the job, before coaching them and finally leaving them alone to get on with it.

The Gospel reading summarises what these disciples had observed Jesus doing since they began following him.

"... Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness."¹

Then, our reading says, Jesus sent the twelve disciples out to do the same, that was to, "proclaim the good news," and "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons."

Having observed Jesus, the disciples were then expected to go out to the lost sheep of Israel, and do what Jesus had done, proclaim the good news and cure people of what ailed them.

Like the disciples back then, if we want to learn how to live the Christian life, we might also want to observe how Jesus lived his life, and then put it in to practice, that is, proclaim the good news and cure people of what ails them.

¹ Matthew 9: 35

We come together as a community – the church – to learn from God, in worship, about what it means to be a Christian, and to observe Jesus, in the Gospels, living the Christian life. Then we take that learning out with us - not to the lost sheep of the house Israel, of course - but to the lost sheep of the country of Scotland - to proclaim what we have been taught through the way we live, putting our learning in to practice by curing the people of our country of what ails them.

It should be noted that although Jesus sent his disciples to Israel first, he didn't end there. At the end of his life he encouraged his disciples to go further, to the ends of the earth. We should do that too. But, the point is that, taught by Jesus, we are then sent out to put in to practice what we have been taught by proclaiming the Good News, and curing people of what ails them.

We have seen this methodology in our country over the past twelve weeks. Here, the Government has learned about Covid-19; it has proclaimed the message that its learning has taught it - stay at home; save lives; protect the NHS; and through the NHS it has put its learning in to practice by curing people of the virus that ails them, as best it can.

As Christians called by God, we are taught by Jesus, we proclaim the Good News, and we put our learning in to practice by curing people of what ails them. As a country caught up in a pandemic, we have learned about the virus; proclaimed the message it has taught us; and have put our learning in to practice by curing people of what ails them.

Recently though Covid-19 hasn't been the only story to affect the world. Over the past fortnight, we have been confronted with not just the virus that is Covid-19, but the virus that is racism. The story associated most recently with this arose in America, but since then demonstrations against racism have spread across the world under the banner Black Lives Matter.

How should we respond? We could do the same as we did with Covid-19, and the same as Jesus taught his disciples to do when he and they faced crowds for whom "he had compassion because they were harassed and helpless,"² as our reading says. We too could learn something, proclaim what we have learned, and then put that learning in to practice to cure our country of one of the things that ails it.

Firstly, we could learn something - about our history. Tell me, what is the bigger danger to society – a mob tearing down a statue, or a school curriculum that largely ignores the racism of our imperial past? If we want to live in a society that reflects in some way the Kingdom of God, we could start by learning something not just about God, but about ourselves and our history. Of course, it is not right for a mob to tear down a statue. But, if that upsets us, we should be outraged at what is not taught to us and our children about racism in Britain and in its imperial past.

Having learned something about God and about ourselves and our history, we then need to proclaim what we have learned. Much of Great Britain's prosperity was founded on the Triangular Slave Trade where linen, alcohol and guns were exported from Britain to the west coast of Africa, exchanged there for slaves who were exported to the Carribean and exchanged for the sugar, rum, tobacco and cotton produced by slaves, which was all then exported back to Britain. Once we have learned about this basis of our prosperity, how can we keep silent about the injustice of it?

² Matthew 9:36

In the book of Exodus, which we read from this morning, we learn how God wrote commandments for the people of Israel, and set them in stone. For the people of Israel, and for many Christians also, learning these laws and proclaiming them have been the defining part of their faith. But, laws, even those set in stone, learned and proclaimed are of no use if they are not put in to practice. Having learned something about ourselves and our history, and decided not to keep silent, but to proclaimed what we have learned, we then need to put our proclaiming in to practice by curing people of what ails them.

Jesus taught in the synagogue, proclaimed the Good News, and cured every disease and sickness. He sent his disciples out to do the same, to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

We are called to learn about and proclaim the extent to which there are in Britain and around the world, but in Britain first, people who are sick of racism; that there is in Britain a history of empire, which has long been buried, and now needs resurrected; that there is a virus of racism that needs healed, and demons that languish in this country that need cast out.

Jesus taught that to build the Kingdom of God we need to learn, we need to proclaim and we need to change the world around us. He started first in Israel. To build a society that better resembles the Kingdom of God in our country – in Britain and Scotland – we need to learn, we need to proclaim, and we need to change the world around us - our cities, our school curriculum, the way we celebrate our past and imagine our future - so that those Britons who are sick of racism may feel in some way cured; so that the buried history of empire may be resurrected and talked about; so that the virus of racism may be healed; so that the demons of racism that languish in grubby corners of our country may one day be cast out.