

**Pentecost 26**  
**17/11/2013**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 65:17-25**  
**Isaiah 12:2-6**  
**2 Thessalonians 3:6-17**  
**Luke 21:5-9**

**“Imitate me”**

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Nearly 30 years ago there came out a movie called “Starman”. The basic story was that an intelligent alien responds to an invitation on one of our space probes to come and visit us, and then is pursued across the country by government authorities. Like most such things, enjoying the film involved suspending most critical faculties for the duration and simply enjoying the ride. But there’s one episode I’ve long recalled since seeing film all those years ago: after his first experience driving a car the alien reports to the driver he has been learning from, “I watched you very carefully. Red means stop, green means go, yellow means go-very-fast.”

We are being watched, and so are teaching each other, whether we know it or not. The young watch and learn from those who are older; the new guy in the office watches and learns from the others what is and is not done in that place; the unskilled learn from the example of those who know how to do things, the unfashionable learn from the fashionable what they ought and ought not to be wearing (although not *always!*). We’re constantly forming and creating each other, whether consciously or not, setting examples and learning from the examples set by others around us.

Now, *unconscious* shaping of each other has probably always happened, and probably always will. Before we can make decisions about who we will be, someone else has already put quite a few years into shaping us, teaching us a language and the basic rules of how to relate to each other in our particular society. But *conscious* shaping of each other has, to some extent, gone out of fashion. We still shape and form our children, of course, but there’s a stronger tendency these days to encourage individuals to find their own selves and ways in the world. Leadership and direction are out and facilitation is in. Modelling ourselves on others is out and self-discovery and self-determination is in.

Yet such a passing-on by modelling and example is part of the character of the story the church proclaims. To speak of being a Christian disciple is to speak of *learning* – “learner” is what the New Testament Greek word for “disciple” means. And being a learner requires teachers – those who can teach and show how Christian life is done. This teaching is done not only by the talking heads, but also by those who say less and act more. Growth in the church, and this includes growth in numbers, will require much such teaching and demonstrating work; “getting people into church” is not even half the battle.

Yet this sort of teaching *is* counter-cultural, against the way things are often allowed to be today. It requires building strong relationships of the type that don’t normally happen these days, except in very specific and limited spaces. These are relationships which cut across generational differences and operate outside of family circles. They cut across different social and economic groupings. These relationships even cut across different times, as we allow ourselves to be shaped by the examples of women

and men who lived the Christian life before us. Part of the church's rediscovery of the power of the gospel will involve a redevelopment of the importance of teaching in Christian faith, and the importance of discipling others, or mentoring, or setting examples of how it is done.

But that will require that those of us who are a little further down the road in experience of the Christian life need to have the confidence to say to others, "do as I have done". In our reading from 2 Thessalonians this morning we've heard Paul addressing a problem in Thessalonica about some people not pulling their weight when it came to the work which needed to be done. In dealing with the issue, Paul said to them, "remember the example we set for you: though we could justifiably have asked you for support, we worked for our own living when we were with you. You, also, should work and not expect others to support you – even if you're working for the gospel" (which may have been what the "idle" at Thessalonica claimed...).

But my point this morning is not whether or not those who work for the gospel should be paid for that work. Like our reflections last week, the particular problem in the letter is not the important thing for us so much as what Paul brings to bear on it. Today I'm more interested in that phrase, "Remember the example": "you know how you ought to imitate us." Elsewhere, Paul writes "imitate me, as I imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11.1; cf. 1 Corinthians 4.16). To our modern ears that sounds arrogant – "imitate *me*". But the church needs men and women of all ages and talents and understandings who are well-enough formed in Christian faith that they can say *humbly* and *without* arrogance, "Imitate me...": *this* is how you live the Christian life.

This doesn't necessarily mean "do as I have done", so that every generation or church has to be the same as the previous one, or even that everyone in the same generation has to do the same thing. Rather it means, *believe* as I have believed, *trust* as I have trusted, *embody* and *enact* your belief as I have tried to. Perhaps it seems a bit over the top to those of us affected by Australian self-deprecation. Many of us learned very early not to big-note ourselves! But whether or not we invite it, we *are* being watched. Indeed, everyone is watching everyone else and so there are many different examples we might choose to follow. This is in no small part the reason that the "lifestyle" and "entertainment" programs and newspaper sections engage us so much: what are others doing, that we might emulate?

Given that there are so many options when it comes to how to be and to act, there's a need to give direction as to what the good examples are, and what the bad ones are, because it's not always clear which is which. Paul says to those he is responsible for – *remember my example, do as I have tried to do*. The church today still needs people who will dare to allow themselves to become example-setters. It's risky, because to say "do as I have done" sets us up for a fall when we get it wrong ourselves – the charge of hypocrisy always lurks in the background. But the fear of failure, or of not doing as well as we might have, should not stop us from aspiring to being right, to doing the right, and to saying to others, "this is how a Christian acts". Fear of getting it wrong isn't reason enough for not trying to get it *right*, and encouraging others along the way with us.

It's more comfortable, and safer, *not* to say such things, because then nothing really has to change. We can make our commitments "to God", knowing that God will see and, not surprisingly, discovering that when we fail God is easier on us than our family or neighbours might be. This has been called "cheap grace". As comfortable as this may be, comfort is not the calling of the Christian disciple. God seeks people who

think that believing makes a difference, and who seek to speak and enact that difference, and who are not afraid then to say to others who are learning the way of faith, *Imitate me*. To be a Christian may mean that I will hold on to my possessions differently from others. To be a Christian may mean that I treat my employees or my employers differently from others. The difference being Christian makes could be any number of things; the point here is simply the importance of being able to say to other Christians, *Imitate me*... If we *dare* not yet say “imitate me”, then we would do well to find other Christians we could learn from. Or we might pray for the courage to claim as godly those expressions of our faith we believe truly are, and call others to a similarly worthy life.

This is not easy for many of us. But whether or not we dare to *say* “Imitate me” does not, in the end, change the fact that we *are indeed* watching and being watched, imitating and being imitated. The questions which matter, then, are these: Who *is* watching you, and what are they seeing...? Who are *you* watching, and what are you seeing?

That God may be glorified in the word and deeds of his people, may he in his grace give us the courage and guidance we need to live lives worth imitating. Amen.

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