**Stowe Sunday 8th August**

Introduction:

When Andrew rang to see if I might be free to take a service this morning at Stowe, I was hesitant due to other commitments but I agreed to come if I could base this talk on a testimony.

I explained that the reason for this is that the 4th August would be the 50th anniversary of my meeting Jesus.

Andrew kindly agreed. So forgive me from diverging from your planned sermon series.

I would like to take you back to the late 1960s, to a small farming community in the village of Te Pahu, just south of Hamilton, in New Zealand.

Joy and Roland were a young couple with two small children who ran a dairy farm. They had both become Christians in their teens and like many of you, had faithfully supported their small village church.

They did everything they could to encourage people to come to church including going round local farms with gospel tracts and invitations to services.

But they saw minimal results, became discouraged and were at the point of giving up when they saw an advert for a Christian conference in Auckland.

The thrust of the conference was the Great Commission in Matthew 28: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations”. They discovered that each word was significant:

**Go** … literally ‘in going’ – get out there and in the course of whatever you are doing…

**Therefore** … refers directly to what Jesus had just said “all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” … I am the Christ, I have conquered death, God the Father has given me ALL AUTHORITY in heaven and on earth – so I am commissioning you to go and do what I did

**Make …** disciples – disciples do not grow on trees, just telling the good news might result in believers but Jesus wants totally committed disciples and they have to be MADE

**Disciples** … the most important aspect of Jesus’ ministry was taking a very mixed bunch of people and nurturing them to be wholehearted and obedient followers. He taught them, trained them, encouraged them, sent them on missions, loved them, rebuked them and believed in them.

He was telling them to go and help others to put into practice all that he had taught them.

Jesus then goes on to tell them how to do this:

“Baptising them in the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to do all that I have commanded you”

**Baptising them** … baptise them so that they are publically identified as His followers and become integrated into the body of Christ, the fellowship of other believers

**In the name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit** .. they need to understand the importance of the Trinity and that, in Jesus they take on a new identity as children of God, in who dwells the son and the Holy Spirit

**Teaching them to obey all that I commanded you …** evangelism introduces people to Jesus but ‘making disciples’ involves helping new believers through a process of understanding ALL that Jesus has taught and commanded, of putting that into practice and of reaching a point when they can teach others as well.

Along with this message was the simple encouragement to everyone at that conference:

Go away and pray that God would use you to help ONE person come to know Jesus and then stick with the person until they are established as a disciple and able to help another go through the same process.

Then help them to help that new person and at the same time pray that God would give you someone else to bring to Jesus

To support them they were introduced to a series of Bible Study books – the first one being (like the first 4 sessions of Alpha) an introduction to Jesus and the remaining ones covering all aspects of getting established and growing as a disciple.

In addition, a couple had been appointed to support people, who came to the conference, wherever they lived, who would visit and encourage them as they invested in others.

This was revolutionary teaching for Joy & Roland and they were gripped by it. But one question that it raised for them was their isolation on a remote farm with the daily commitment of milking a big herd of cows.

Should they sell the farm and go somewhere as missionaries?

The answer was to stay where they were, doing what they did, but pray that God would bring people to them.

So they stayed and they prayed

After a few months, Bill, the teenage son of a neighbouring farmer agreed to study the introductory book about Jesus. He became a believer and for the rest of the year they met with him every week to help get him established. He went off to Dunedin University, where he spent the rest of his working life as a Professor and also helped students to become and grow as disciples of Jesus.

Then there was his younger brother Michael – who eventually went to University and to settle in Australia

I hope you see where this is going … and then there was this young Brit.

50 years ago, in 1971, I got a job on a dairy farm in the same village as Joy & Roland,

Around the beginning of July, I met them was invited to their house for supper.

The people I worked for warned me that they were "very religious" and so was both wary but intrigued to get to know them.

After a very enjoyable meal & evening at their house, I asked them about their faith and why they wanted to tell people about Jesus.

I think that I told them that I considered myself to be a Christian but couldn't think why anyone would want to go around talking to others about Jesus.

Roland's reply has stuck with me - he didn't answer my question, but instead asked me: “have you ever seriously considered the life of Jesus as revealed in the Bible.”

I had to admit that though I had enjoyed RE classes and had been confirmed, I could not honestly say that I had. They invited me to take home the book of Bible studies on the life of Jesus. They suggested that I could study one chapter each week on my own and then come back for a meal & a chance to chat about it. Given that I was keen to do anything to have an occasional break from the work on the farm, I accepted.

* Over a period of 4 weeks, I worked through chapters on Who is Jesus; why did he come on earth; why was he crucified and finally – How can I know him?
* By the end of July, I reached the point of being fascinated by Jesus but regretting a lot of things I had done in my life. I wanted to find a way to ‘turn over a new leaf’, to reconnect with God and live a better life.
* On the Monday (2nd August) I was driving past an old Maori chapel, that had a big sign outside saying: “Jesus says, I am the way and the truth and the life,” - that grabbed my attention and I read it again and then the bit that followed “no one comes to the father except through me”
* I thought about that – and wondered if it was the same as saying “anyone CAN come to the Father through me
* On Wednesday 4th August, I completed the 4th study and found that I was, by then, convinced that Jesus was God and that he had come on earth to show us that God loved us and longed for a relationship with him
* I also believed he came to die for us so that anyone who accepted him to be whom he claimed to be, could have their sins forgiven and be re-united with God.
* That final study helped everything to fall into place and I remember praying a simple prayer, asking for forgiveness for my past life and inviting him to come into my life and take control
* As I prayed that prayer, I remember thinking at the time that I have never been much good at New Year resolutions & being worried that I might not be able to sustain a life without swearing like a trooper and a few other things I was ashamed of – but the study also spoke about the Holy Spirit and so I also asked the Holy Spirit to come and take control
* To my utter amazement and to the joy of the couple who had been helping me – both those prayers were answered in a fairly decisive way – and I began to discover that I was “under new management” and gradually major changes began to happen.
* Over the next 9 months, until I left New Zealand the following April, I met with Roland every Friday evening and we worked our way through a series of studies. He taught me the importance of understanding what happened when I accepted Jesus and of spending time daily, getting to know him.
* He taught me about Holiness, giving, keeping the Sabbath, preparing and sharing my testimony, memorising scripture and about helping someone else to find Jesus and get established.
* Roland was farmer, with no formal theological training and yet over 9 months, through him, God laid a foundation in my life that has not just sustained me but enabled me to be effective in helping others to grow as disciples in both in Africa and the UK.
* The result of that is another story but it is the reason that I am able stand here today, 50 years on, and declare that without any shadow of doubt Jesus is everything he claimed to be, that he is amazing and that there is nothing on earth to be compared to knowing him and living with him
* It is also the reason that I am convinced that Jesus can use anyone who is willing to do what Roland and Joy have done – take Jesus and his word seriously and invest in the life of one person at a time, to help them to discover Jesus and grow as his disciple.

In conclusion, I just want to highlight three things that I have discovered are essential to keep our relationship with Jesus alive and effective:

* 1. Time alone with Jesus daily – reading the Bible, chewing it over and praying in some form or other
  2. Being part of a small group – with the discipline & encouragement of regular Bible Study & being accountable to others
  3. Being part of a church that feeds, encourages and nurtures - I put that in 3rd place because for many, not being able to come to church during lockdown was a massive blow & also not everyone can be free on a Sunday.

In a moment we will be singing ‘great is Thy faithfulness’ – please think about what I have said as we sing:

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth  
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow  
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside

Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness  
Morning by morning new mercies I see  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me