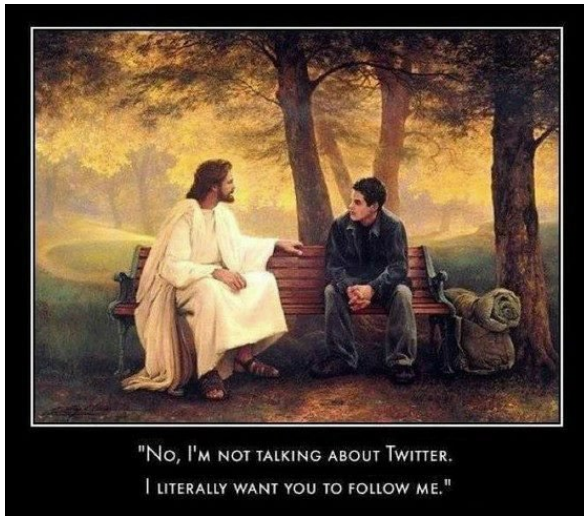


2 A call to discipleship



All Christians are called to be disciples of Christ, and to live out that call in our daily lives. Before we start to think about what that might look like, and how we might recognise discipleship in ourselves and in those around us, let's think a little about what the word "disciple" means.

It comes from a Greek word meaning "learner"/ "pupil" and bound up with that is the idea of the relationship that happens between a pupil and their

teacher (more about that later). So discipleship begins with a relationship between us and Jesus. There are three key elements: following Jesus, learning, and passing it on – ie making other disciples.

We follow Jesus when we know him and recognise his call on our lives. We get a sense of what this looks like from the Gospels, for example in John 1 there's an account of two disciples who saw Jesus and followed after him, asked where he was staying, went there and remained with him for the rest of the day. (It's no accident that John puts this right at the beginning of the Gospel.) That they remained with Jesus is important – it's more than just turning up now and then. Archbishop Rowan Williams uses the image of a bird-watcher: sitting around, expecting to see something, being aware and attentive so as not to miss what God is doing. Following Jesus also means being willing to go where he goes – which is not always where we might want to go – and being with those whose company Jesus seeks (the excluded, the poor, the wretched) – again, this is not always those we would have chosen to be with. Sometimes, following Jesus can be costly.

- ❖ ***Think back: how and when did you first get to know Jesus? Who helped you to do this?***
- ❖ ***Has following Jesus ever cost you, or someone you know, something?***

The word disciple is, at its root, about learning – but that's not just the sort of learning that's associated with teaching a pupil in a school. One definition for the Greek word for "disciple" is "one who is rather constantly associated with

someone who has a pedagogical reputation or a particular set of views.” This idea of being “constantly associated” with someone is important. A lot of discipleship is about relationship – and who a learner is is determined by their relationship with the Master, the one they’re following. Part of what’s involved here is being part of Jesus’ relationship with God – we are called/invited into being with the Father through the Son.

The life of a disciple is about getting to know more about God, about ourselves, and about the world around us. As we do that, we gradually grow towards spiritual maturity – but we can never say “we’ve arrived.” One way of looking at it is to think of a disciple as “a life-long learner of Jesus.”



- ❖ ***What is something you’ve learned about God, yourself, or the world around you that changed your life?***
- ❖ ***How does that idea of being “constantly associated” with Jesus sit with you? What might that feel like in practice?***

Passing it on, making other disciples, is also part of discipleship. We see this at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, where Jesus tells his followers just before he leaves them:

“Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

Embedded in this is the idea that in order to teach someone, to help them become a disciple, we need to be one ourselves. It’s important to remember, though, that we don’t have to be an expert – and “making disciples” is certainly not a task only for those who are ordained. The 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon said, “Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread.” Jesus disciplined people by inviting them into a relationship and by demonstrating things for them: they watched him heal people and then were sent to do it themselves, they saw him praying and asked him to teach them how to pray. He also challenged behaviours that were wrong or unhealthy, and

showed by his own example a better way to be. We often think of Paul as a travelling preacher – but so much of his ministry happened when he lived amongst a particular community. It comes down to relationships.

- ❖ *Who, by their example, has helped you to follow Jesus?*
- ❖ *Who might you help to do this?*

A biblical call story about discipleship

Mark 2:13–17



Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

The Gospels give us lots of stories about Jesus calling various people to become his disciples. This one is very basic, and we’re told very little about what happened before or after this. All we know is that Levi became a disciple solely because of Jesus’ invitation to “follow me,” and that he was a tax collector. Tax collectors in that context were appointed by the Roman authorities to collect taxes for Rome; they were hated as collaborators who often charged their own people high fees which they kept for themselves. They were seen as sinners – so when Jesus goes to dinner at Levi’s house it was shocking. One of the key things about this story is that we don’t have to be perfect before we can become a disciple of Jesus: there is a place for sinners amongst those who follow Jesus. Which is just as well, since we are all sinners.

The story doesn’t tell us what happened to Levi. Although he’s sometimes identified with the apostle Matthew (also a tax collector) Mark’s list of the

Twelve doesn't include Levi, and his name isn't mentioned again in this Gospel. This is useful, as it stops us thinking of "the disciples" as if all of them were heroes instead of ordinary men, women, and children who experienced Jesus calling to them and tried their best to live it out.

❖ *Levi's response to Jesus' invitation was very quick: what was it about Jesus that led him to get up and follow immediately?*

❖ *What do you think Jesus meant by "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners"?*

Other biblical call stories involving discipleship

Mark 1:16-20 (similarly Matthew 4:18-22)

Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John

Luke 5:1-11

Simon Peter (and also James and John)

John 1:35-51

Andrew and Simon Peter, Philip and Nathanael

John 4:1-42

The Samaritan woman

Mark 8:34-37

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Another part of being a disciple is also connected with what we do, and that is making a difference in the world around us – building the kingdom of God, forgiving, loving, seeking justice, making peace. This comes out clearly in the Baptism liturgy and the commitments people make when they are confirmed or when they renew their baptismal promises.

God's call and Baptism

As we saw with Jesus' words at the end of Matthew's Gospel, the instruction to make disciples is linked closely with baptism. Baptism is, as the Catechism reminds us, "the sacrament by which we are made children of God, members of Christ's body the church, and heirs of the Kingdom of God." (ANZPB/HKMOA, 933) The baptismal liturgy itself begins like this:

God's Call

The bishop or priest says

E te whanau a te Karaiti / Dear friends in Christ,
God is love, God gives us life.
We love because God first loves us.
In baptism God declares that love;
In Christ God calls us to respond.



Everything – our wanting to become disciples, and the baptism which leads us further into that life – starts with God calling us. The initiative is God's, and we're invited to respond. Baptism has been part of the Church since the very beginning, and believers' children are also baptised (at least since 215 CE and probably earlier). In the early Church it was no mere formality, but a rite which demanded something from those who sought it – hence the long period of preparation before someone was baptised, culminating with the season of Lent. Baptism is a sign of belonging to a community, and affirms the faith of the community as well as of the individual. It reminds us that God's action in our lives will be a life-long process, as our sense of discipleship deepens.



When someone is baptised the community of faith commits to sharing with them "what we ourselves have received: a delight in prayer, a love for the word of God, a desire to follow the way of Christ, and food for the journey. This is a commitment to being disciples *together* – a reminder that this isn't something we can do on our own. Baptism is the foundation for our ministry within the Church and outside it – on every day of the week.

- ❖ ***What does baptism mean to you?***
- ❖ ***How can we encourage ourselves/each other to value and celebrate our baptism?***
- ❖ ***Do you know the anniversary of your baptism? Why not find out and celebrate it!***

Community and Discipleship

Discipleship isn't something we can do on our own. Being part of a community – in a parish, or in a Christian group in a school or workplace – matters enormously, as there we seek the company of others who are also trying to live as servants of Christ. A ministry unit can become a learning community, as each of us tries to learn how to be a disciple, and as the community as a whole discovers how to be a place in the world where the love of God can come alive. But, as we know, being part of a community of people who are different from us isn't always (ever?) easy. Sometimes, when difficulties arise, it helps to ask ourselves “what is Christ giving me through this person or community?”



Another useful thing to think about is “what can help sustain us as disciples of Christ?” This is where spiritual practices or disciplines come in, ways in which we can connect with God and allow God to continue to shape us. Richard Foster, has called these “God’s means of grace: the means by which we place ourselves where he can bless us.” Some people use Lent to try out a new spiritual practice, as Lent encourages us to slow down and pay attention to our own spirits and to God’s Spirit working in us.

Another writer on discipleship, Alan Knox, sees it as “helping each other follow Jesus.” “Helping” because the real work is done by God, and we help each other because this is mutual (reciprocal) work: we all need help – and we can all help others. “Follow” because it’s not a passive adventure or a mental exercise, it’s a way of life, and “Jesus” because we want people to follow Jesus – not us – and because we might not all follow Jesus in the same way.

- ❖ *What do you think of “helping each other follow Jesus” as a way of describing discipleship?*
- ❖ *What spiritual practices are sustaining you at the moment?*

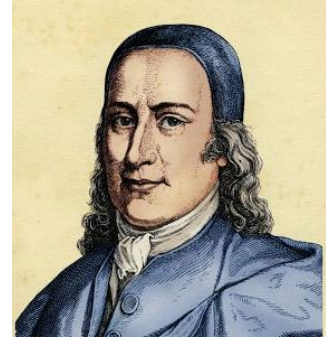
Meet some disciples



St Clare of Assisi (1194-1253) was one of the first followers of St Francis of Assisi. She had heard Francis preaching in the streets of Assisi and was deeply moved by his words. She left her home (sneaking out at night) to follow Francis, who received her into religious life. Clare went on to found the Order of Poor Ladies for women who chose to embrace

monastic life in the Franciscan vision, and was the first woman to write a Rule for a monastery. Clare said, "Let the love you have in your hearts be shown outwardly in your deeds."

Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) was a German religious and social reformer and leader of the Moravian Church. He contributed hugely to missiology with his awareness of cross-cultural mission as a fundamental task of the church. As a child he had prayed and read Scripture, but his real awakening came when as a young man on the Grand Tour he saw a portrait of the thorn-crowned Jesus with an inscription "I have done this for you; what have you done for me?" Zinzendorf said to himself, "I have loved Him for a long time, but I have never actually done anything for Him. From now on I will do whatever He leads me to do."



C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) was a British writer, literary scholar, and Anglican lay theologian. He had abandoned any Christian faith in his teens, but began to explore Christianity again in his early thirties and became an active member of the Church of England. In addition to his academic work, Lewis used his abilities as a writer and communicator to defend the

Christian faith. His well-loved works include the Narnia Stories, *The Screwtape Letters* and *A Grief Observed*. He said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen - not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

Think of someone you know who embodies the life of a disciple: what makes them so? Closing Worship

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

Closing Worship

You might like to close each session by praying together. Here are some possible prayers.

God of the desert,
as we follow Jesus into the unknown,
may we recognise the tempter when he comes;
let it be your bread we eat,
your world we serve and you alone we worship.
this we ask through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

God, you are working still,
breaking down and building up;
open our eyes to discern your hands
so that we may take our place
as labourers together with you.
Hear this prayer for your love's sake. Amen.

God,
give us work till our life shall end,
and life till our work is done. Amen.

**E tō mātou Matua i te rangi
Kia tapu tōu Ingoa.
Kia tae mai tōu rangatiratanga.
Kia meatia tāu e pai ai
ki runga ki te whenua,
kia rite anō ki tō te rangi.
Hōmai ki a mātou āiane
he taro mā mātou mō tēnei rā.
Murua ō mātou hara,
Me mātou hoki e muru nei
i ō te hunga e hara ana ki a mātou.
Āua hoki mātou e kawea kia whakawaia;
Engari whakaorangia mātou i te kino:
Nōu hoki te rangatiratanga, te kaha, me te korōria,
Āke ake ake. Āmine.**

