

“TRUE DISCIPLES”
Mark 14:43-52

We're almost at the end of Lent now (which some people are very relieved about!) – a period of time which was originally seen as a way of preparing for baptism – in the early centuries of the Christian Church often took place on Easter Sunday – and it continues to be a time when we can think carefully about the demands of discipleship. Of course, that aspect of our relationship with Jesus should be part of our thinking at all times, but Lent can give us a framework within which to give it special examination.

The trouble is, whenever we begin to think about our commitment to Jesus as his followers, his disciples, we are confronted with what seems to be a great deal of effort on our part. Discipleship means hard work, sacrifice, self-denial, prayer and fasting, wall-to-wall witnessing – and, in our own brand of evangelical activist Christianity, lots of meetings! It is tough going, with often very little to show for it: which is why we spur ourselves on with thoughts of the better future that awaits us “*when Jesus comes or calls.*”

And what makes it even more difficult for those of us who are already feeling pretty discouraged by the poverty of our own attempts to be good disciples, is that we are constantly shown the example of the first disciples and exhorted to live up to their amazing standards. These were men and women (though we tend to focus on the men) who did wonderful things for their Lord, who gave up everything for the Kingdom, who lived lives that we might just be able to emulate if we have real determination and spend lots and lots of time in prayer and Bible study. I'm as guilty as the next preacher for beating people around the head with such stuff. And in the end we all feel failures, don't we? It doesn't seem to work for us like it did for them. Our lives seem to get a lot more complicated and our desire to live as Jesus wants us to just isn't as strong. We don't measure up to the stature of these wonderful men and women of God – those of the Bible, those of the history of the church, even those who sit around us on Sundays.

But what were those first disciples really like? They are mentioned in the reading we have just heard. If we had read from a few verses earlier we would have found them sharing a meal with Jesus, going to pray with Jesus, declaring their loyalty to Jesus. But what is Mark's only comment on them here? – “*Then everyone deserted him and fled*” (14:50). Are these really the disciples that we hold in such high esteem, these men who have been revered as saints throughout the ages? Yes – and this isn't all.

When we look properly at these men who followed Jesus round, we see that the picture isn't necessarily quite as rosy as we often think. The people whom we think of as Jesus' disciples, the ones who are at the forefront of the gospel stories, the Twelve, were a pretty diverse bunch. There were some who were fairly clever, some who weren't; some who were well off, some who weren't; one was fiercely nationalistic, one was a Quisling, a tax collector working for the Romans; some were so quiet we never hear anything but their names mentioned, others were so volatile that they are nicknamed “*the Sons of Thunder*”. It's not your ideal mix of people for a world-changing project.

And it certainly took a long time for them to be knocked into shape. Yes, there were successes along the way – Luke tells us in *Luke 9:6* and *10:17* that there were times when everything worked out just right. But, strangely enough, they are only fleeting comments. If you read through the gospels, you'll see that there was an awful lot more that appeared to go wrong. Being one of Jesus' disciples was no picnic, despite the feeding of the five thousand, and these were not supermen who had success at everything they did. In fact, they were very much like us.

In *John 6* we find that there were some people who initially joined up with Jesus, but dropped out because the commitment was too much. They had a bit of trouble stomaching Jesus' teaching and then found that they didn't really believe it all after all. So they “*turned back and no longer followed him*” (*John 6:66*). Well, if you are here this evening, you haven't quite done that yet, but you may have thought about it.

Many times in the gospels we read that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus was on about. Sometimes they actually say that – they have to ask Jesus what his parables mean; they miss the point about his looming death; they can't make out what on earth the Kingdom means. Sometimes they don't actually say it, but it becomes fairly obvious from their behaviour that they have completely missed the point of what Jesus was saying. Now this isn't an excuse for us to take Bible study lightly, but we shouldn't get too hung up if there are things about Jesus and his teaching we don't understand – after all, as we have said so many times, there's plenty that we do understand that can keep us going in the mean time.

These disciples, whom we hold up to be such paragons of Christian virtue, also argued and bickered amongst themselves – and, on occasions, with Jesus himself. They quarrelled over who was the greatest, they told Jesus not to be so daft when he talked about his death, they generally behaved as if the things Jesus said to them had had no impact at all. Are these really the people on whom the unity of the Church is founded?

And they got things wrong on all kinds of occasions. They couldn't cope with the possessed boy while Jesus was up the hill being transfigured, they hadn't got a clue how to deal with 5,000 hungry listeners out in the countryside, they shooed away the mums who'd brought their children for a blessing, they fell asleep when Jesus desperately needed their support, they ran away when the heat really got turned up. What a shower!

And, in many ways, what an encouragement! Because these are the very people who did have such an impact on the world, the people whose lives revolutionised history. And they were ordinary people, a bit like you and me – people who made mistakes, who failed, who let each other down, who let Jesus down. And what makes them true disciples isn't necessarily anything good about themselves, nothing about their own determination to succeed, nothing to do with theology degrees or counselling certificates or hours spent on their knees, nothing to do with any special qualifications or skills.

What made them true disciples was **Jesus**. And, praise God, that's still the case today. You see, if it was something inherent in them that was the secret of discipleship, there are plenty of examples of great men and women down through the ages whom we could take as our examples and our mentors, people who are not necessarily Christians – or even religious – but people with great ideas, great stories, great inspiration. What marks out the disciples of Jesus is not that they are **disciples** of Jesus, but they are disciples of **Jesus**.

These people were not volunteers, so full of their own confidence and ability that they signed up to help Jesus out. In some cases there seems to be almost a reluctance to get involved. But Jesus makes it very clear that he has chosen them. Look at what he says in *John 15:16*. And if Jesus chose them, he had some idea of what they'd be like. As he does with us. We are chosen by Jesus, but he is aware of our foibles – some of them, with the help of his Holy Spirit, will be overcome: some of them will be used, reshaped, re-channelled for his glory. When you begin to wilt on the path of discipleship, remember that it's Jesus who has chosen you – and he has chosen you despite what he knows about you.

Having chosen the disciples, he called them. The idea of choice – of election, to give it its proper theological term – is a difficult one for many people to grapple with: it certainly is for me! But the idea of call is perhaps a bit more accessible to us. Jesus knew who he wanted, so he went out and got them. Wandering along the beach he called some fishermen; he saw a customs officer at his booth and called him; others were added to the group as he spoke into their lives in indisputable and irresistible ways. And whenever they began to doubt that they were chosen, they could look back at those moments and say to themselves, “Well, he actually came and got me. He called me himself. He must have had some purpose for me.”

And we can still be encouraged by that today. In some way or other, each of us has felt some call to be a disciple of Jesus. It may have been as dramatic as the call of Matthew - unmistakable and irresistible.

Our life was changed from that point on. It may have been that the call came via a friend, as Andrew brought his brother to Jesus. It may have been in some other, less clear-cut way, but equally real and positive. But there was that call, that reassurance that you are chosen. And, just like those first bewildered disciples, you can look back to that time – or to the time when you witnessed to it in baptism or confirmation – and be encouraged that Jesus actually did call you to work with him.

As we've said, it didn't always go smoothly for the disciples. And some of them failed pretty spectacularly. None more so, perhaps, than Simon Peter. He was an argumentative, impetuous man who really fouled things up more than once. And then, in the couple of hours after Jesus' arrest, made the biggest mistake of his life – he said that he had nothing to do with Jesus: he swore that he had nothing to do with him. The last couple of years seemed to have been a waste of time. His own emotions, the difficulty of his situation, the apparent failure of all that Jesus had come to do – it all got on top of him, and he blew it. Just like I would have done: just like you would have done.

But, wonder of wonders, Jesus forgave him. Jesus gave him another chance. He still got things wrong after that, even. Paul writes of having to put him right on at least one issue. But the point is, Jesus forgave him. If you ever need hope in your Christian life, there it is. No-one is ever a failure as a disciple of Jesus. Sometimes we mess things up a bit. Sometimes we blow our chances of being a clear witness for him. Sometimes we think we have done something that cannot ever be forgiven. But thank God – Jesus does forgive. He keeps on giving us more chances to do what he has called us to do. When Jesus hung on the cross for your sins and mine, he was taking on himself the consequences of all your sins, not just the first, or the first few – all of them. You can never really blow it as a disciple of Jesus. He is always there for you to turn back to and say “I'm sorry: I really wish I hadn't done that and I don't want to do it again. Please help me.”

And that relationship of love and trust – where Jesus loves us and trusts us to follow him as we are able, and we love him and trust him to forgive us when things go wrong – means that, like the first disciples, we can call ourselves his friends. Again in John's gospel, we see Jesus making that relationship explicit. He hadn't called them just so that they could do his bidding, so that they could blindly obey like servants with no sense of responsibility and no real idea of what was going on. They were in on the plan, they were co-workers with Jesus.

You and I, folks, if we are true disciples, are not dupes, blankly trailing along behind a dictator. We are not slaves to rules and regulations. We are not people who are going to be slated and ripped apart whenever anything goes wrong. We are Jesus' friends. He loves us – so much, in fact, that he died for us. He cares about us. He has given us the opportunity of finding out all about him and all about God's plan of salvation which he came to put into effect and which he calls us to join. When the path of Christian discipleship seems a bit tough, remind yourself that you are a friend of the Boss. He loves and cares for you. He'll see you through it.

Finally, although there are many other things we could say about the disciples, there's just one more that I want to draw to your attention this morning. We can say all kinds of things about the first disciples of Jesus, but there is one thing which can always be used as an objection as to why their case is special. They physically accompanied Jesus. He was with them; they talked with him, ate with him, touched him. We don't have that privilege.

Strangely enough, their real mission didn't take off until he'd has never left. Discipleship is hard – I don't want to deny that – but the Spirit is there to help. Gordon Fee, the great New Testament scholar, has written a huge book called *God's Empowering Presence*, in which he argues that what distinguishes the people of God, what sets apart the disciples of Jesus Christ, is the empowering presence of God made manifest in the Holy Spirit. (That's a rather inadequate summary of nearly 1,000 pages, but it boils down to that!) True disciples are not those who try hard, who do all kinds of spiritual exercises, who show their commitment by believing a checklist of correct doctrines, who are blessed with success in every area of their life and witness, who have wonderful biographies written about them. True disciples are those

ordinary men and women who are chosen and called by Jesus, who know deep down that they are his forgiven friends, and who are empowered by the Holy Spirit. They are open to what God wants to do in their lives but recognise that God is going to work through them, not leave them to get on with it themselves.

Yes, we need to be committed, and there are responsibilities which we need to take on. But the great thing about being a true disciple of Jesus Christ is that he is the main mover. The burdens are lightened if we grasp the fact that Jesus doesn't want to load us down with guilt and problems; he doesn't want to send us off on our own to make the best we can of it. He loves us as his very special friends, and being a true disciple is a privilege, an honour and a life that is second to none once we open ourselves up to the empowering of the Holy Spirit and realise what true disciples really are. You're not just a disciple: you're a disciple of Jesus. Rejoice!

Discussion notes on the next page

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But that can also be an encouragement! They were ordinary people, a bit like you and me – people who made mistakes, who failed, who let each other down, who let Jesus down. And what makes them true disciples isn't necessarily anything good about themselves: what marks out the disciples of Jesus is not that they are **disciples** of Jesus, but they are disciples of **Jesus**. Look at what he says in *John 15:16*.

Having chosen the disciples, he called them. Jesus knew who he wanted, so he went out and got them. And we can still be encouraged by that today. In some way or other, each of us has felt some call to be a disciple of Jesus.

Think of the example of Peter. Jesus forgave him. Jesus gave him another chance. He still got things wrong after that, even. No-one is ever a failure as a disciple of Jesus. That relationship of love and trust – where Jesus loves us and trusts us to follow him as we are able, and we love him and trust him to forgive us when things go wrong – means that, like the first disciples, we can call ourselves his friends. We are Jesus' friends. He loves us – so much, in fact, that he died for us. He cares about us. He has given us the opportunity of finding out all about him and all about God's plan of salvation which he came to put into effect and which he calls us to join. When the path of Christian discipleship seems a bit tough, remind yourself that you are a friend of the Boss. He loves and cares for you. He'll see you through it.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you ever think about yourself as a **disciple** of Jesus? How does that make you feel?
2. What do you find hardest about being a disciple of Jesus?
3. Why do you think we put the first disciples of Jesus on such a pedestal? Are they worthy of our honour in any way? Why/why not?
4. What is there about the first disciples that you find impressive? Why?
5. If Jesus calls us, can we resist? If so, what happens then?
6. In what ways does Jesus confirm in us his call? his forgiveness?
7. In what ways do you experience the enabling of the Holy Spirit in your own life of discipleship?