

“THE FIRST DISCIPLES – THE WOMEN”

Luke 8:1-3

When we talk about particular groups of people, we tend to focus in on certain individuals, don't we? If we were to talk about Margaret Thatcher's Cabinet, for example, we probably only remember the high-profile members, or the ones that had a particular effect on us – Geoffrey Howe, Keith Joseph, Norman Tebbit – despite the fact that, over the many years she was in power, there were dozens of people who were involved. For some people, Manchester United will always mean Denis Law, George Best and Alex Stepney: or Southampton will be Terry Paine, Mick Channon and Ron Davies.

When we talk about Jesus' disciples, we immediately think of the twelve who were closest to Jesus and who are named in the gospels. I wonder if we could name all twelve between us. [Simon Peter Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (Alf's son), Simon the Terrorist, Judas (Jim's son) and Judas Iscariot.] If I'd asked for three, you'd probably have said Peter, James and John, because they're the three who seemed to be closest to Jesus and who are most often mentioned as being with him at significant moments. Sometimes, though, the gospels mention seventy and sometimes one hundred and twenty. Jesus had a big group of disciples. There were always people who were following him.

Some people followed him out of curiosity. They actually physically followed him around, eager to see what he'd do, anxious not to miss a word of what he said, enjoying his stories, lapping up his criticisms of the religious and political leaders. On a couple of occasions at least, there were well over five thousand people following him – and they ended up being fed by the five loaves and two small fishes.

Some people followed his teaching. They heard what he said and decided that it was worth putting it into practice in their own lives. There were a few – people like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea – who wanted very much to follow his teaching, but were initially at least reluctant to let other people know that they were disciples, so they didn't physically follow Jesus around.

The closest disciples, of course, did both. They followed Jesus around physically – they let other people see that they were following him: and they followed his teachings – at least, they tried to understand and put into practice what he said, not always terribly successfully. At the core of that group were the twelve people we mentioned earlier and, as we read a few moments ago, a group of women – at the core! Three are named – Mary Magdalene, who had been delivered by Jesus from demonic possession; Joanna, who was married to the king's chief administrator, so was a pretty well-connected woman; and Susanna, of whom we know nothing other than her name. But Luke tells us that there were many others as well.

These were women who had been helped by Jesus – healed of illness and delivered from demons. They knew from first hand experience that Jesus was a great teacher and a worker of miracles. And, although we haven't got time to go into all that this morning, it's true that Jesus' attitude to women was actually very, very radical for is time. We are so used today to women being accepted as equals in most ways that we don't really grasp what an enormous change it was for Jesus to speak to women, to spend time with women, to notice women even, in a society that really relegated women to a position not much higher than the furniture. They had no rights at all. They were kept out of certain areas of life completely. They were treated very much as possessions. But Jesus came along and included them in all that he did – and they were naturally very grateful.

And because of the way in which Jesus had treated them and transformed their lives, they wanted to help him in return. These women – more than just the three named – travelled with him from town to town (v1) and did what they could to provide for and support him. They used what means they had to ensure that Jesus and the travelling band of disciples did not go without anything that they needed. These women were true disciples in that they both followed Jesus teaching and were unashamed to be known as his followers.

As we read through the gospels, we actually discover that these women were the ones who were most faithful in their following. If you look at the stories of Jesus' death in the four gospels, you will find that the women were the ones who stuck with him all the way to the cross. The only male disciple mentioned as being at the cross in any of the four gospels is John – who mentions it in his own gospel. The other followers were all women. They stuck it out to the bitter end supporting and trying to encourage Jesus as he went to his death. And who are the people who accompany Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb with the body of Jesus? – the women.

On the morning of Jesus' resurrection, the first people to realise that Jesus was alive were the women. They were the witnesses of the fact that Jesus had been brought back to life again – a very significant thing, really, because women were generally not considered reliable enough to be accepted as witnesses in court. But they were the ones who were, in effect, the very first evangelists. They were the ones who ran back to tell the others the good news that Jesus was alive. As I say, that probably doesn't strike us as particularly significant because we are used to women playing a full part in our society today. But it was very different then and the fact that Jesus had disciples who were women was a revolutionary departure from the norms of Jewish (and, indeed, Roman) life.

So Mary, Joanna, Susanna and the others were an important part of the Christian community from the very outset. They had been helped by Jesus in various ways and really wanted to help him in return. They were offering their response of gratitude to him for all that he had done for them. Their gratitude was translated into action. They could have just worshipped and prayed where they were, offering God thanks for all that he had done for them. But instead that decided to do what Jesus' real disciples have always done. They followed his teaching and they visibly, physically followed him, just as the men did.

I think it hardly needs saying today that women are as integral a part of the community of Jesus Christ as are men. There is no need whatsoever for them to feel that they are second class disciples, that they are not able to get on and work for Jesus as men do. Paul makes that point in his letter to the Galatian Christians (*Galatians 3:28*). We're all in this together, folks! And we all have something that we can offer to Jesus as a response to the amazing love which he has first shown us in healing and delivering us – most significantly, of course, by dying for us on the cross at Golgotha. Just as the women were "*helping to support them out of their own means*" – and notice here that it says "*them*", the whole community of them – so we all have that which God has given to us which we can use in the work of the kingdom of God and in the support of the whole Christian community.

But for all of us this morning – male and female – the point to remember from all this, is that the authentic disciples of Jesus are those who follow him both in terms of following his teaching and in terms of being visibly associated with him. I'm sure we would all say that we try to do what Jesus asks of us. We try to put his teachings into practice in our lives. We try to live our lives according to the ethical commands of Jesus. We try to offer him our praise and worship with a genuinely grateful heart.

But what about wanting to be *seen* as a follower of Jesus? What about being prepared to associate ourselves with him visibly? Even when, like the women who followed Jesus, it might appear to be something unusual, unorthodox, ground-breaking, are we ready to let others know that we are his disciples? Are we ready to stand with Jesus as the women did at the cross even when we may appear isolated and alone? Are we ready to witness to others about the transforming power of Jesus in our lives? Are we ready to communicate the good news of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ?

You see, that's what the inclusion of these women in the story really highlights – the need to follow in both ways. Don't call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ if you aren't prepared to follow his teachings. And don't say that you follow his teachings if you aren't prepared to be known as a Christian disciple. True disciples follow in both senses – and the community of true disciples does not exclude anyone on the basis of gender (or anything else, for that matter!).

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When we talk about Jesus' disciples, we probably think of the twelve who were closest to Jesus and who are named in the gospels. Sometimes we think only of Peter, James and John, the three who seemed to be confidants of Jesus and who are most often mentioned as being with him at significant moments. But the gospels mention seventy and sometimes one hundred and twenty disciples

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The closest disciples did both. They followed Jesus around physically and they followed his teachings. At the core of that group were the twelve people we mentioned earlier and a group of women – Mary Magdalene, who had been delivered by Jesus from demonic possession; Joanna, who was married to the king's chief administrator, so was a pretty well-connected woman; and Susanna, of whom we know nothing other than her name. And Luke tells us that there were many others as well.

These were women who had been helped by Jesus – healed of illness and delivered from demons. They knew from first hand experience that Jesus was a great teacher and a worker of miracles. Jesus came along and included them in all that he did – and they were naturally very grateful. And because of the way in which Jesus had treated them and transformed their lives, they wanted to help him in return. These women travelled with him from town to town (*v1*) and did what they could to provide for and support him. They were true disciples in that they both followed Jesus' teaching and were unashamed to be known as his followers.

These women were the ones who were most faithful in their following: they were the ones who stuck with him all the way to the cross. They stuck it out to the bitter end supporting and trying to encourage Jesus as he went to his death. On the morning of Jesus' resurrection, the first people to realise that Jesus was alive were the women. They were the witnesses of the fact that Jesus had been brought back to life again, the very first evangelists.

The authentic disciples of Jesus are those who follow him both in terms of following his teaching and in terms of being visibly associated with him. We try to do what Jesus asks of us, to put his teachings into practice in our lives, to live our lives according to the ethical commands of Jesus, to offer him our praise and worship with a genuinely grateful heart. But what about wanting to be **seen** as a follower of Jesus? What about being prepared to associate ourselves with him visibly? Are we ready to witness to others about the transforming power of Jesus in our lives? True disciples follow in both senses – and the community of true disciples does not exclude anyone on the basis of gender (or anything else, for that matter!).

Questions for discussion

1. Name the twelve core disciples.
2. What was the women's motivation for following Jesus? What is yours?
3. What does it mean to "follow the teachings of Jesus"?
4. What does it mean to "follow Jesus visibly"?
5. Do we still try to exclude women from some areas of discipleship? If so how? Why?
6. What would you say are the marks of true Christian discipleship? (Keep it simple!)