

Discipleship

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, May 2006.

Part 1: The Women (Acts 9:32-43, Like 8:1-8)

I recently had a little booklet published, on the theme of confirmation. It's a booklet to give to people who're about to be confirmed or who've just been confirmed. Confirmation is essentially about taking an adult step to own your faith for yourself. It's about affirming for yourself the promises that were made for you, if you were baptised as a child. So it's an important part of the faith journey of lots of people. And I personally prefer to leave confirmation till a candidate's at least in their teens, so they're mature enough to understand what it is they're doing.

And when I was writing this booklet, I obviously had to make some decisions. Of all the themes I could discuss, what's most important? And what should I start with? And the more I thought about this, the more I realised the importance of one particular theme: discipleship. Being a disciple or follower of Jesus. It gets to the heart of the issue much better than words like 'belief'. Because you can believe something with your intellect, but it doesn't necessarily affect your actual priorities or the way you live.

So I started my booklet with a whole lot of material on being a disciple of Jesus. Why? Because it gets us to the heart of what Christianity's all about, not just for people who're being confirmed but for everybody who wants to take their faith seriously.

It's something we've talked about before at Holy Trinity. We've said how back in Ancient Israel, the way students would learn was literally to follow their teacher or rabbi around, to do what he did, and imitate him. The idea was that the students would one day become rabbis themselves, so they got on-the-job training, by going around with the older rabbi. And the word for these students was *disciples*, from a Latin word meaning 'somebody who learns'. It means somebody who has a mentor.

Today, we're starting a three-part series on the disciples of Jesus. And over the next couple of weeks, we're going to focus on one or two of Jesus's inner circle of 12 disciples. We're going to find out what sort of people they were, what sort of mistakes they made, and how they related to Jesus. But today we're looking at the whole idea of being a disciple. We're also looking at the wider circle, out beyond the 12 people we normally think of as disciples. Because there are a few people in there we don't often notice. And they can teach us as much as the well-known disciples in the 'inner-circle'.

So we know that Jesus, from the very start of his ministry, went around calling a group of people to drop what they were doing and become his disciples. People who go around with him, watching him and learning from his teaching and his example. People who can carry on his message after he's gone.

And in the early days, the word about Jesus spreads quickly. People hear about the miracles he's doing. They listen to the teaching he's giving about God, and they realise they've never seen or heard anybody like this before. Dozens of people rush to join Jesus. Hundreds. So as Jesus is going around the country, he's followed by this enormous crowd of people, who're hanging on his every word. At least, for a while.

But then we find something interesting. In John's Gospel (John 6:60), we're told that after a bit of teaching they found hard to accept, lots of these disciples left Jesus. John says this: 'As a result of this, many of his disciples were going away to the things they left behind, and were no longer walking with him'. In other words, disciples of Jesus simply give up on him. They find Jesus is more radical than they expected. He's more demanding than they thought he'd be. The cost of following Jesus is too much. So they go back to their old lives.

It's easy to imagine that if only we met Jesus for ourselves, face to face; if only we could sit at his feet, and hear his teaching; if only we could see with our own eyes his miracles, then we'd have no more doubts. But the truth is this. Lots of the people who met him face to face, lots of the people who heard his teaching, lots

of the people who see miracles with their own eyes, do doubt. They find the challenge too much. They count the cost and realise it's all too much. And they want out. Maybe we're not so different from those first disciples after all. Maybe faith wasn't so much easier for them than it is for us today.

In our reading from Luke's gospel, Jesus tells this story about the sower and the seed. It's a story about people's faith, and the seed represents faith. Lots of the seed gets eaten by birds or choked by weeds. Only a relatively small amount of seed actually germinates and grows. That's what faith's like. It can easily be damaged or crowded out: by the pressures of life, or by other people.

The fact is that following Jesus is always going to be a challenge. Jesus says: 'Follow me'. And some people say: 'Well, I respect your moral teaching', or: 'I admire Christian values'. But Jesus is more than a moral teacher or social reformer. Jesus says 'follow me', and some people say: 'Well, to be honest, I'm too busy right now'. It's what some people said in the first century too.

The challenge of the Christian faith is to follow Jesus, to have him as your mentor, to shape your faith and priorities around him. To be a disciple. And if we look at the wider circle of disciples who followed Jesus in his own day, we find a group of people that people don't often think about. And that's the women. It's easy to picture Jesus walking around with his friends, a kind of all-male gang.

But the reality is that Jesus had lots of close friends and followers who were women, and his wider group of disciples included plenty of women. In the Gospels and the Book of Acts we find lots of references to these women, and we know some of them accompanied Jesus as he went about the place teaching and healing. They were disciples: they were people who were committed to Jesus, who'd counted the cost, and who travelled with him and supported him. We know that this included supporting Jesus financially. And we also know that some of them were the first to arrive at the empty tomb on the day of resurrection.

Incidentally, there's a lot of nonsense talked about one of these women in particular: Mary Magdalene. If you read *The Da Vinci Code* you'll find all sorts of bizarre claims about her that have no historical basis at all - about her marrying Jesus and having his children. In *Jesus Christ Superstar* she was a prototype hippy and a girlfriend of Jesus.

Even in traditional church art you find images of her as a prostitute who turned into a follower of Jesus. There's no evidence for that either. What we do know about Mary Magdalene is that she was one of the people who supported Jesus and his disciples financially. In other words, she was reasonably well off, and generous with her money.

But more than that, she was also a disciple of Jesus, as lots of other women were. Now, in first century Jewish culture this was unusual. Being a disciple was seen as a thing men did. Women weren't considered suitable candidates for being disciples. Rich women might sometimes give money to support their favourite rabbi, or teacher. But here's Jesus taking them around with him wherever he went, and causing scandal as he did so.

Jesus didn't just call men to be his disciples. He didn't just call religious leaders to be his disciples. He didn't just call specially good or holy people to be his disciples. He certainly didn't just call men to be his disciples. So if you've ever felt that to be a follower of Jesus you've got to be a certain type of person, forget it. As we look at the wider circle of Jesus's disciples, two things are clear. One is this. Jesus calls everybody, even the least likely candidates. *Especially* the least likely candidates. And the other is this. Not everybody stays.

There's a challenge here for each of us as we start this series on the disciples of Jesus. Disciples aren't people with tea-towels on their heads in the first-century Middle-East. They're men and women like you and me. The thing that makes them special is that they're people who say to Jesus: 'Yes, I'm going to follow you. I don't just want to settle for a faith that's mere words on a page, I want a faith that's centred on a living relationship.'

A disciple is somebody who does more than admire Jesus. It's somebody who follows Jesus. And it may be that there are people in church this morning who're hearing that call for the first time. Maybe it connects with other events in your life, or other things you've been thinking about recently. Don't ignore it. This week, I invite you to take a real step of faith and become a disciple of Jesus yourself.

Part 2: Peter (Acts 2:14-24, Matthew 14:22-36)

There are a number of people in our church and our community who work in recruitment and human resources. So here's something especially for them. It's in the form of an office memo:

To: Jesus, Son of Joseph, Nazareth Carpenters and General Builders.

From: Jordan Management Consultants, Jerusalem.

Subject: Staff Aptitude Evaluation.

Dear Sir,

Thank you for submitting the CVs of the 12 men you have picked for management positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken our tests, and we have arranged for all of them to visit our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant.

It is the staff's opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. We recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel that it is our duty to tell you that Matthew has been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus definitely have radical leanings, and they both registered a high score on the manic depressive scale.

One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, gets on well with people, has a keen business mind and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious and innovative. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right hand man. All the other profiles are self-explanatory. We wish you every success in your new venture.

Yours sincerely,

I like that. It says a lot about how Jesus might have had different criteria in mind when he called his disciples than most employment agencies today might have.

We've reached the second part in our three-part sermon series *Discipleship*. Last week, we started by looking at the whole idea of what a disciple is. And we found that being a disciple wasn't restricted to the inner core of 12 men. There was a wider group of disciples who used to go around with Jesus and supported his work, and a lot of these were women. We also saw how a lot of people who started off as disciples dropped away when they realised that Jesus was more challenging and demanding than they expected.

So that brings us to this week's subject, where we're starting to focus more closely on this inner core of 12 disciples who Jesus seems to have spent more time with, and opened his heart to in a special way. These 12 would learn from him in a detailed way what Jesus's ministry was all about, and they'd go on to be the foundations of the church. Now, before I go any further, I want to try and answer a question that springs to mind for lots of people when we talk about the 12 disciples, and it's this. Was Jesus just an old sexist to choose only 12 men as the inner core of disciples?

Now the answer to that is 'no'. And here's why. It's to do with the symbolism of the number 12 in the Bible. Now, in case you're feeling completely confused, let me explain. Do you remember the story of Joseph and his coat from the Old Testament? Remember how Joseph's father Jacob had lots of sons. And after lots of adventures and misunderstandings, these sons and their families become the foundation of the nation of

Israel. In fact, each of the sons gives his name to a whole tribe which occupies a whole section of the land: Benjamin, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and so on.

So that number 12 is very important in Biblical symbolism. And not only the number 12, but these 12 particular men. It becomes a shorthand way of referring to the whole nation of Israel, and the whole of the land God gave to Abraham and his descendants. So remember that equation: 12 special men equals 12 tribes, equals the whole nation of Israel.

Now you've got to think about what happens in the OT. It's a story of God reaching out to his people, inviting them to be in his family and live his way. But people repeatedly turning their back on God and refusing to follow the laws and guidelines they've been given, for how to live well and happily. In other words, what God's hearing from these 12 tribes, with the names of 12 men, down the centuries is the word 'no'.

Now, into this situation comes Jesus. And Jesus's work is to create a 'new Israel', a whole new humanity that says 'yes' to God. So it's no accident that Jesus chooses as his inner circle 12 men. And when Judas goes off and betrays him, the other disciples find they have to get another man in to replace him, to bring the number back up to 12. These 12 *disciples* (disciples means people who learn) are going to be 12 *apostles* (apostles means people who're sent). Because they're the ones sent out by Jesus to build his church, to be the foundation stones of a brand new people of God, a new Israel. So it's not sexism, it's symbolism! 12 disciples in a sense replacing 12 sons of Jacob as the tribes of God's people.

And out of these 12, one of the least likely candidates was a man called Peter. Peter's home was in Galilee, in the north of the country, at a town called Bethsaida, and we know he had a strong northern accent. And Bethsaida at that time was a mainly Jewish town in the Roman empire, but quite quite a lot of non-Jewish people living there too. Peter's job was as a commercial fisherman, and we also know that he was married. He did most of his fishing in the sea of Galilee, from a port called Capernaum. Peter worked with his brother Andrew, and we know that both of them had become very interested in the teaching of John the Baptist.

Now, some of us easily get stereotypes in our minds of what religious people are like. Vicars are seen as goofy and other-worldly. Holy people are seen as quiet and terribly nice to people. So pure and good that they never get their hands dirty or shout at their children. But Peter was a rough, working bloke. Jesus sometimes gave nicknames to his followers. And the moment he looked at Peter, he called him Rocky.

In fact, there's a clever double meaning here. He's Rocky because he's rough-hewn, down to earth, solid. But he also becomes rocky in a different sense because Jesus later says he'll become the rock or foundation stone on which he'll build his church. In fact, Peter's often seen as the leader of the disciples, and their spokesman. On the day of Pentecost it's Peter who goes out and tells the crowds what God's been doing.

Now, I'm not going to go through the whole of Peter's life in detail. You can go home and during this week, you can read some of the things he did. But there's one thing we must look at. And that's what a complete and utter pig's ear he makes of being a disciple. Let me just tell you about a few of the times he screws things up.

In fact, read Mark's Gospel to find out the most about Peter. It's in Mark's Gospel that Peter is really portrayed warts and all. And there's a good reason for this. The Gospel of Mark was actually based on conversations with Peter himself. So you can imagine Peter, sitting there, retelling his own story, and being brutally honest about what a complete mess he often made of things.

So, a few instances. When Jesus tells Peter that Jesus is going to be killed and rise again, Peter actually tells him not to be so stupid. And Jesus has to turn round and tell Peter that he doesn't know what he's talking about. During the account of the transfiguration of Jesus in a dazzling and glorious way, it's Peter who starts jabbering all kind of nonsense. In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before the death of Jesus, at one of the most significant moments in the history of the world, Peter keeps on falling asleep.

And ultimately, Peter actually denies three times that he even knew Jesus. In fact, not only does he deny Jesus directly, he does so using swear words that turn the air blue. Now, remember, this man, who tries to persuade Jesus not to die for the sins of the world, who misunderstands Jesus, who falls asleep when Jesus has asks him

to stay awake, who denies Jesus using the most extreme swearing he can summon up, this same man is the head of the disciples, and the foundation on which the church will be built.

And I don't know about you, but I find that kind of encouraging. When I look at my own failings and worry that I'm not a very good follower of Jesus, I look at Peter, the leader of the disciples, and realize that he wasn't either!

So what was it that made a difference? What was it that meant that, despite all his failings and problems, Peter came through to be the founder of the church, who died a martyr's death in Rome and became an inspiration to millions of us? Simply this. He was passionately committed to Jesus Christ. And that passionate commitment means he never gives up. He keeps on learning and growing. He keeps on saying sorry and starting again. He may be all too weak and human, but Jesus keeps on giving him another chance, and Peter keeps on taking it.

And by the book of Acts, he's a man on fire with love for God, taking the message out to whoever will listen. And he's also a man who keeps on learning. He keeps on having to find out new things about what the Christian message is. He keeps on having to rethink everything in some fairly major ways, and you can read some of those stories in the Book of Acts.

But all this tells me something important about being a disciple of Jesus. At the heart of it is passionate commitment to Jesus Christ. At the end of the day, nothing else matters, and Peter's proof of that. That's the challenge for us too. At the end of the day, nothing else matters except a passionate commitment to Jesus Christ. Whatever your failings, do you have that in your life?

Part 3: James & John (Job 38:1-11, Mark 10:35-45)

We've come to Part Three in our series *Discipleship*, where we're looking at the early followers of Jesus, and finding out what we can learn from them. In the first part, we saw how Jesus had a whole crowd of followers, who went around with him, learning from him and following his example. We found out that a lot of these people were women, and that lots of people who started out following Jesus found the experience too challenging. So they gave up on Jesus and went back to their homes and jobs.

Then last week we started looking at Jesus's inner group of 12 disciples. In particular we looked at Peter, or Simon Peter to give him his full name. And we saw how he kept on getting everything wrong. He says the wrong things, he does stupid things, and he even denies flatly that he knows Jesus. But we also found that he was somebody intensely committed to Jesus Christ, who was given new starts and he took them. He never gave up, he just kept on keeping on. He kept the faith, despite all his failures.

Now, one thing we didn't dwell on last week was the fact that Peter had a brother, called Andrew. And Andrew was also a follower of Jesus. In fact, amongst Jesus's 12 disciples there were two sets of brothers. There was Peter and Andrew. And then there was James and John. And it's James and John we're focussing on this week.

So first of all, what do we know about James and John? We know they were the sons of a man called Zebedee. Not the little character with the spring from the Magic Roundabout, but Zebedee the wealthy fishing magnate from the Palestinian town of Bethsaida. So we know these two boys were from a wealthy and influential family, almost certainly the family got their wealth and influence from the family fishing company. Jesus nicknamed the two of them: 'Sons of Thunder', probably because they were volatile, aggressive people (at the time, if you call somebody 'son or daughter of..' something, that's often a way of describing their character or temperament). Along with Peter and Andrew, Jesus called them to leave their fishing nets and follow him early on in his ministry.

The other thing we know about them is something quite odd. Especially when you think that they were in Jesus's inner circle of followers. They were fiercely ambitious. And the main way we know that is from our gospel reading, from Mark's gospel. Remember what it is they say to Jesus. They swagger on up to him and come straight out with it: 'We want you to give us anything we ask for'. And then when Jesus asks what they're

on about, they say this: 'When God's shown the world that you're his Son and you're there ruling over the nations, we want to be sitting at your right hand and your left hand', in other words, 'We want some of that power too'.

Now why do they ask this? Maybe it's partly because they're from a wealthy and important family. So when they begin to see that Jesus really is the Son of God, they see the whole thing in terms of human power and influence. It's a bit like people who make friends with politicians tipped for the top. Or actors and musicians who're about to make the big time. The sort of people who sidle up to them and become their friend because they want some of that fame and money to go their way too.

And in a way, that sounds reasonable. Jesus isn't just another religious teacher. He's the Messiah, God's chosen king who's going to throw out the Roman invaders and set up government from Jerusalem (at least, that's what people expected the Messiah to be). This guy's going to be king, and they want to be sure that they get a slice of the action. You can put all this another way. For James and John, following Jesus is about what they can get out of it. They follow Jesus because he seems to promise power, influence, feeling good about themselves.

But Jesus challenges them by saying, 'You guys don't have a clue. You don't have a clue what you're asking for. Can you walk the same path I'm walking?' And of course they say, 'Yes. No problem, we'll do that'. But then Jesus gathers his inner circle of followers round him and shows James and John how they've completely failed to understand what he's been going on about. What Jesus says is this:

'You're seeing everything in terms of political power, influence and prestige. Everything for you is about personal ambition. But I'm going to turn upside down anything you've ever heard about power and influence. If you're following me, the journey's not about power or wealth. It's about serving. It's about putting God and other people first, and putting yourself last. Real greatness is prioritising the needs of others.'

Sometimes people ask me what title they should use for clergy. Is it priest, or vicar, or pastor, or Reverend or Padre or what? (There's usually one person who comes up to me after a wedding and says: 'Thank you padre!'). My own preference is to think of myself as a 'minister'. Because to 'minister' to somebody means to serve them, to put their needs before your own. And that reminds me that being a leader isn't about spiritual power, or influence in society, or even running the church. It's about serving people. The church is at its worst when it's on the side of wealth and power - you only have to look at history to see that. But it's at its best when it's serving others.

That's the same challenge Jesus gives to James and John. He says to them: 'You guys have warped values. For you, what matters in life is money and power. That's what you really want. I'm going to show you a different way - a better way. It's the way of service. It's a whole new way of looking at the world, based on love and compassion. But that's not weakness, it's real strength. Any old fool can be selfish and ambitious. It takes real courage to challenge head on the values of your culture, all the things that most people live and work for.'

And the same challenge echoes down the centuries to us today. To those of us who say we're followers of Jesus. And those of us who feel we're dipping our toe in the water, thinking about faith for the first time in ages.

What are we doing it all for? Are we walking the path of faith in Jesus for our own comfort, our own inner peace, our own spirituality? Even our own respectability? The same call of Jesus comes to us as it came to the ambitious James and John: 'Whoever wants to be truly great must learn to serve others'. When we start to take the Christian faith more seriously for ourselves, we're signing up for a radical kind of lifestyle. A lifestyle that challenges head on the power-hungry career-ladder ethos that so many of us are used to from the workplace.

And it's a lifestyle that challenges the get-rich-and-famous overnight mentality that you find in the Lottery, and programmes like *Big Brother* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*?

You see, we can't follow Jesus and remain unchanged. He takes the dodgy values that we come across most of the time, in our workplaces, schools, pubs and TV screens, and replaces them with something much more demanding, much more radical.

But ultimately, much he replaces them with something more satisfying and lasting.

The American writer Henry David Thoreau once said: 'If somebody does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer'. And in a way, that's the challenge Jesus gives to James and John. To discover a whole new set of values that turn conventional wisdom on their head. To walk to the beat of a different drum.

What Jesus is saying is hard-hitting and radical. Faith and spirituality aren't lifestyle extras, which are bolted on to a normal life with normal priorities. Discipleship means a whole new set of values and priorities. At the end of the day, says Jesus, *it's not about you*.

What would our lives be like if we really believed that? If we really believed that it's not all about us, but about serving God and other people? What would our church be like? What would our world be like?

And what would it mean for you and me to live according to Jesus's priorities today, and over the next few days? What would we do differently? Have a think about it this week. Because Jesus calls you and me to exactly the same type of discipleship he called James and John too. And they didn't find it easy either.