

Belief, Discipleship & Australian Goths

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, 15/01/2006.

(John 1:43-51)

At the nursery my 4-year-old goes to, some of the mums were talking the other day about what they'd been like as teenagers. One of them confessed that she'd been a mod and used to wear all the mod gear.

One of the other mums said that she used to be a Goth. She used to have a big black overcoat, dyed black hair, heavy make-up and so on. But the thing is, she grew up in Australia, which was rather hot. So she said the whole of her teenage years were spent being swelteringly hot, in this big black overcoat and layers of black clothes in the Australian heat. She said that that's why Goths in Australia always look red-faced. Not like the healthy, surfing Australians you usually see on TV.

Actually, the real revelation was that a certain nursery dad, who's also a member of this church, used to have very long hair and can be seen leaping around in the front row of the video of a Queen concert. You're going to have to see if you can guess who it is. And it's not me!

But for some reason, the image of all those red-faced Australian Goths stuck with me all week. There's something quite endearing about teenagers wanting to find their identity. And trying out the persona of somebody they admire. They want to dress like that person, and adopt their ways of talking and their attitudes. Maybe it's a pop-star or a film-star or a sports personality. And they'll keep on doing it even if it makes them terribly uncomfortable, or makes other people think they look silly.

And it's not just impressionable teenagers who try to do that sort of thing. I remember one old Methodist minister who grew his hair so he'd look like the church leader John Wesley from the 18th century. In big churches, you still get young clergy who try to emulate the great preachers who've gone before them. There's definitely an 'All Souls Langham Place' style of preaching, in the style of the famous preacher John Stott. And a Holy Trinity Brompton style, where the preachers all sound a bit like Nicky Gumbel, who developed the Alpha Course!

Well, that's OK. People do it because they admire somebody, and they want to become more like that person, by copying the way they look, the way they behave or the way they speak.

Now, in a funny sort of way, exactly the same thing used to happen in Ancient Israel. The way students would learn was literally to follow their teacher (or rabbi) around, do what he did, look the way he looked, and imitate him in everything. 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 imitating him. And one day, in turn, they'd have a crowd of students following them as well.

And the word for these students who followed their teacher round was disciples. A disciple is basically a person who has a mentor - a supervisor who helps them learn.

In our Gospel reading, we saw Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee, calling people to be disciples. He was calling these people to drop what they were doing, and of course most of them were commercial fishermen on the lake. They were to put down their nets and become his disciples, people who go around with him, watching him and learning from his teaching and his example.

So they were the first disciples. But the call to be a disciple wasn't just something which went out to 12 people 2,000 years ago. The challenge that Jesus issues to people in every age, including ours, is the same call. It's a call to discipleship, to follow Jesus and have him as our mentor or life-coach.

But haven't we always been told the heart of the Christian message is about believing in Jesus Christ? Surely, what matters most is our beliefs?

Well, yes and no. In practice, lots of people have beliefs that make very little difference to their lives. Somebody

can say: 'I believe in the Loch Ness Monster, or fairies at the bottom of the garden'. But it doesn't necessarily make any difference to how they live their lives. Lots of people believe in God, but it doesn't necessarily affect how they live.

There's a song that was sung by Frank Sinatra and Elvis and The Bachelors. It goes: 'I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows'. Well, OK, but that's rather a pointless thing to believe. It's a bit like that R.Kelly song from a few years back: 'I believe I can fly, I believe I can touch the sky'. Well, that's nice. But it's not exactly a useful belief, is it?

Belief can be a bit theoretical and detached. A box you tick on a census form. But discipleship is about how you actually live your life. It's much more active and committed than belief:

- It's about who or what you're following.
- It's about the values and priorities you live by, and what motivates you.
- It's about your character, and how your character's developing and changing. The direction you're heading in.
- It's about your relationships. How you treat people, day in day out.

In other words, discipleship is applied belief. It's what happens to belief when it gets up out of the armchair and starts to get its hands dirty. That's what being a Christian is about, not just believing something in a vacuum. Jesus doesn't only call people to be believers, he calls them to be disciples.

The big question is: are you and I ready to count the cost of being a disciple, and not just a believer? Here are three things it'll mean:

- 1) Spending time with Jesus.** That's the main thing about having a mentor. A mentor is somebody you learn from on the job. In the Christian life, that means spending time getting to know the Jesus of the Gospels. Finding out more about him. Spending time praying to him. Listening for his voice. Finding him at work in our world.
- 2) Learning to see the world as he sees it.** As you spend time with your mentor, you start to see things in a new way. You start to see things you hadn't seen before. You'll get angry and upset about things that you never used to be upset by, and you'll start to value things that didn't seem so important in the past.

And that's what happens in the Christian life as you follow Jesus. You start to see things in a new way, and your priorities can start to shift.

- 3) Learning to serve others.** Time and time again, Jesus tells his disciples that what he's calling them to is not to have warm inner feelings, or personal power. They're becoming disciples to serve others. There's an episode in the Gospels where two of his disciples are arguing about which of them is going to have most power and influence.

But Jesus tells them that being his disciple isn't like being elected to a governing body. It's more like being given a mop and bucket. They're called to serve. Disciples are called to follow Jesus. And the road Jesus walked down wasn't an easy road. That's why so few people take it.

If you go to Ottakars or Waterstones, and you look in the Mind/Body/Spirit section, or the Religion section, you'll find lots of books of things to believe in. You'll find lots of books about happiness and inner peace.

But Jesus didn't come to give people new things to believe in. He called people to follow him and to count the cost of that commitment.

And Jesus didn't tell people that what they should be looking for is more happiness or inner peace. He said those things come as a by-product of something more important: loving God, and loving people, in real and practical ways. That's the road Jesus calls you and me to follow him down.

It's all about finding faith in the real world, a faith that makes a real difference – to my life, and the lives of the people around me. And the word Jesus uses for it is: *discipleship*.