

Disciples of Jesus

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Exodus 19.2-8a

Trinity 2

Romans 5.1-8

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Matthew 9.35-10.8

The twelve

Every schoolchild knows how many disciples Jesus had. In fact it seems to be a very effective piece of acted teaching of Jesus to have chosen the 12.

The origins of Jesus people, the Hebrews, goes back to Moses and the twelve tribes. In choosing twelve followers Jesus is provocatively making himself the new Moses. Moses was the great leader who brought salvation from slavery in Egypt. Moses was the one who brought the law to show how to live God's life. And yet Moses also knew a new teacher would have to come and lead his people further on. Jesus was saying he was to bring another great deliverance to the world. In Deuteronomy 18.15 Moses says

'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.'

This became part of the hope of Jesus' contemporaries for someone to come and bring them a new future; a person who was the Messiah. Jesus saw himself as the deliverer but not exactly the messiah people were looking for.

Jesus set himself up as a rabbi, he chose twelve disciples and was proclaiming this was the time for God to act and he was the person through whom God was going to act.

But what is a rabbi?

Rabbi

In Jesus' time the word rabbi meant great and to be respected. In particular the rabbi taught the faith. On one occasion John the Baptist was called rabbi. On twelve occasions Jesus was called rabbi. Interestingly Jesus said his followers should not be called rabbi or teacher because they only had one rabbi and teacher. This was of course himself.

Because of their reputation rabbis would be sought out and people want to become their followers. Jesus broke with this and chose twelve people himself to follow him.

It is one of our understandings as Christians that God chooses us. This gives us great assurance because the relationship we have is because we have been approached and we're not going to be let go of.

There are of course questions about people whom we think might not have been chosen. But I'm going to leave them to one side for the moment.

Certainly Jesus had many more followers than the twelve. At the beginning of Luke 8 we read:

'Soon afterwards Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.'

We can certainly also add the sisters Martha and Mary with their brother Lazarus.

It is very significant that although Jesus chose twelve men to be The Disciples in fact many women were highly valued by Jesus and played very significant parts in his ministry.

Throughout his ministry Jesus was seeking as many people as he could to understand who he was and to follow him.

Disciples

But if Jesus' way of being a rabbi was different, I think being a disciple has more to it than meets the eye too.

Disciple sounds like a pupil, someone who is going to receive information and be more knowledgeable. We might like to think the teacher in front of a class passing on a lesson to their children. But even that is different these days and the focus is not so much on the actions of the teacher but on the pupils being learners.

Jesus was very well aware of this distinction, not least in his use of parables. Jesus told stories that drew you in, made you ask questions and challenged you to give a response. You were to make sure you learnt the lesson.

I can imagine being a disciple of Jesus as a great challenge not because of what you were hearing but of how you were being turned upside down. You were seeing the world and your life from a new point of view. You are not being given answers to questions so much as discovering a new way of life.

So if a disciple wasn't quite a pupil maybe they were an apprentice. The point about apprenticeship is that you will acquire a skill. You

have to apply yourself, putting aside your self-confidence and take on abilities in a wholly new way. Learning to be a carpenter as Jesus would have known was not just being told about wood and tools. You had to do some hard work and come to terms with your inadequacies along the way.

But the business of being a pupil who learns or an apprentice who is being transformed still does not grasp the depth of being a disciple of Jesus.

Pupils go to school. Apprentices go to workshops. Jesus twelve disciples lived with him day in day out for three years. To be a disciple of Jesus was to live in his family. On one occasion he rather scandalously demoted the importance of his flesh and blood. In Matthew 12.46-49 we read:

‘While Jesus was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers!” ’.

Jesus sees people being drawn to him and he extends relationship. He gave of himself and he looked for people to give of themselves too. Some of this might have been about learning new things some of this might have been about a great sense of transformation. But all of it was within a relationship that was personal.

Jesus lover of people

Jesus the rabbi was passionate about people. And when we take this and look at his ministry it is simply astonishing about the ambition Jesus has.

Just starting with his disciples he chose a variety of people who had no common theme except they had been invited and said yes. There were tradespeople in fishermen, they were professional people in tax collectors who collected money for Rome, there were people who hated the Romans because they were zealots.

They were the people who came to him in need who might be rich and want meaning for their lives like the rich young ruler. There were people who were desperate and wanted healing. Jesus gave himself to foreigners from neighbouring lands or Rome itself like the centurion. They might have just been feeling shameful and rejected

Jesus had to step forward and give them dignity before they could ask for his ministry which included the scandal of giving his forgiveness. This action could only be made by God so just who did Jesus think her was?

There were the people who hated him, pretended to be righteous but acted with deceit and treachery. Yet Jesus was patient and understanding even of them.

So to all the people Jesus gave time, wisdom, healing, forgiveness. For Jesus each was a valued person and there was an opportunity for God to be at work.

There are so many episodes that are touching and challenge us about the ways in which we relate to people. But for me one is when he is presented with a woman who had been caught in adultery (John 8.1-11). Her life is a scandal, her accusers are being devious seeking to trap Jesus. Dare I say Jesus doesn't know immediately what to do?

So he just crouches to the ground and doodles in the dust. He drops out of the conflict, collects his thoughts and seeks some wisdom.

I like this because despite the solution not being obvious Jesus stays with the needs of both the woman and her accusers. Never mind for the moment the genius of the answer he provides. He stays with the people and seeks mercy for the woman and her accusers.

Our invitation

I think Jesus continues to make the same invitation to us that he made to all of those people we find in the Gospels.

There can be so many ways that we engage with faith. Each of them can be about truth and beauty, fellowship and service, buildings and money.

Our chief task is to know God invites us into a relationship that continues to grow. It is a relationship of love and love always deepens and always matures. Love satisfies because you are with the beloved. If love is about something else like financial security or nice holidays you have missed the point.

I remember CS Lewis saying we have to be very careful because if we have God and something it may well become something and then God and then in the end just the something.

Were invited to a strong faith in Jesus Christ who will teach us, discipline us and welcome us into his family. He is the centre around which it all works. He is the source that will bring life to all the variety within our lives.

Let us spend time with the Gospels. Read of Jesus and ask him to draw us to himself just as he did to the people you find you are reading about.

Jesus said he came that we might have life and life in all its fullness (John 10.10). Let us enter in and always continue to grow in that life.