

## JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

In the Gospel Reading we learn how Peter, Andrew, James and John became the disciples of Jesus. It is also the opportunity to think about the meaning of discipleship or following Jesus. We are all called to be disciples of Jesus; it is what the Church is for. For each one of us the experience is different. The one thing we have in common is that we are all ordinary people. Jesus calls ordinary people to be his friends and followers. We don't have any special status or qualifications. Our Lord can make us what he wants us to be if we take up the challenge to follow him.

The first disciples of Jesus were fisher folk by trade. There were many fishermen in Galilee. Josephus, the great historian of the Jews who was for a time governor of Galilee tells that in his day three hundred and thirty fishing boats sailed the waters of the lake. For the ordinary people of Palestine, fish was their staple diet.

Jesus called them at the start of his public ministry. He needed a band of followers to support him in the work he had to do. It is not to be thought this was the first time he had been with them. They had probably stood in the crowd and listened to him on other occasions. Perhaps they had stayed to talk with him after the rest of the crowds had left. They were probably aware of the magnetism of his presence. In the account given in St Luke's Gospel of the calling of the first disciples, there is the miracle story of the catching of a large shoal of fish at the bidding of Jesus, and Peter's fear and admission of unworthiness. We all know the feeling when we are asked to do something we feel very uncertain about. Jesus gave them the reassurance they needed and they were willing to follow him. Perhaps it was just as well at that time they couldn't see how it was all going to end; neither at that time could they know what they were to become, after his death and resurrection. They were to become leaders of the new Christian Movement, teachers, healers, and missionaries spreading the Gospel of Christ to other countries. The distances they travelled would have been considered far more vast and arduous than the times in which we live. Simon Peter ended his days in Rome, Andrew in Achala in Greece. Both were crucified. James became the first Christian martyr slain by Herod Agrippa the first and John was banished to the Island of Patmos where tradition has it that he wrote the Book of Revelation. This in itself is a miracle if you think about it, and a miracle that is constantly being re-enacted in our times. God takes the raw material of human nature and breathes new life into it, and fashions it to be used for his good purposes in the redemption of the world, his work of saving grace for all people and all nations. Discipleship is for everyone. Jesus calls all people to be his followers but sadly many don't want to know and few choose to follow.

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? It begins at Baptism – our entry into the fellowship of the Christian Church. We make promises, or they are made on our behalf to renounce our sins and to turn to Christ. It begins at our baptism and is a journey of a lifetime. All kinds of things can happen on the way. We can loose out in our early years through not receiving the spiritual nurture of our parents or Godparents. Through lack of spiritual education which highlights the importance of teaching young children the faith and the work of Sunday School. The attractiveness of worldly things can tempt young people and older people as well to forget what the Church is about. People sometimes feel rejected by the Church if they are not helped in times of difficulty and distress and leave the Church for that reason. People

sometimes come back to the Church when they have a need and it can be a time for re-dedicating their lives in God's service. This is where the sacraments play such an important part in the life of the Church in fostering their allegiance to Christ. The Healing Ministry with the laying-on-of-hands can also be an act of reconciliation/.

It seems to me there are two kinds of disciples of Christ. Those who have benefited from their Christian inheritance and the Christian traditions and have remained loyal to the Church throughout their lives, finding in it their source of comfort and strength in all the ups and downs and sorrows and problems of life, and those who have sometimes strayed from the Church and have come back to the Church through having an experience of Christ, or a vision of the goodness of God, or found themselves in need of God. – the so-called 'born again Christian'.

It is rather like the story of the Prodigal Son. The older son who had always stayed at home with his father and the younger one who had left home and squandered his inheritance and when in need had returned home. And what a joy and what a celebration! With God our Father, whatever our state, he is always there to welcome us. We always have a place with him.

I know that some people who call themselves Christians find it hard to relate being a Christian to being a member of Church. If the Church hasn't got a good image or they don't find what they are seeking in Church – friendliness or social acceptance – they blame the Church. However, for better or worse, it is the Church for whom Our Lord gave his life, and we are the 'torch bearers' for the new generation. To bring the light of Christ into all the dark places in the world, where there is suffering and evil. It is our responsibility to give the Church a good image and to be the sort of people that other people like and want to be friends with and to get to know. We have to put a lot of effort into the Church, into our Church membership and it is this kind of offering we are making when we say the prayer, "we offer ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice". We need to be willing to put time and effort into our vocation and service, and whatever particular gifts we have and to offer them to God. It is also not possible to be a Christian alone in the world. We need the fellowship of other Christians. To belong to the Church is to be part of the 'Body of Christ'.

The purpose of the Church is the constant renewing of Christian values and objectives within the framework of a Christian-orientated group of people. Helping people to find their true potential by the leaven of the Holy Spirit working within our midst.

What does 'becoming a disciple of Jesus' mean to each one of us? As far as I was concerned, I had a traditional Christian upbringing. Both my parents were Churchgoers and we were usually taken to Church on Sundays. I know my mother suffered from Sundays as a child. They had to go to Church on a Sunday and they always wore their best clothes which were rather uncomfortable. In the afternoons they had to sit indoors and read the Bible. My father was very devout. He always used to say his prayers before he went to the Hospital where he was a Physician. He came from a loving family. Not so my mother who very rarely saw her parents and was brought up by her older sisters and various Nursemaids, some good and some not so good.

After our marriage, when my husband joined the Regular Army, we moved around the place a lot and I didn't very often go to Church. When we settled in Cambridge in the 1960's, we joined the Round Church and used to take the children on a Sunday morning. The Curate at that time was David Watson who became well-known as an Evangelist, writer and preacher. Sadly, he died young. He certainly had an influence over my Christian life. He took a marvellous Service for the children and got them involved doing things. We had what he called "sausage sizzles" when we went out for picnics. He started a Young Wives group for Bible Study which was held at our home. It was as a result of these meetings and studying the Scriptures that I realised I needed to make some changes in my life.

There may be all sorts of changes that need to be made. Relationships that need to be healed; fears and anxieties that need to be overcome; resentments and frustrations that spoil us being the sort of person we would really like to be. Loneliness, feelings of isolation, failures which prevent us from leading fulfilled lives. Being a disciple of Jesus can help bring about a 'change of direction' in these matters.

Another person who had an influence on my Christian life was one of the Franciscan Brothers at St Benet's in Cambridge. I found myself more drawn to their kind of worship and way of life. In those days I became a Companion and began to enjoy Quiet Days and the occasional Retreat. Prayer became very important in my life. When we lived in Carlisle, our home was in the countryside about seven miles south of Carlisle and I was alone most of the day when Michael had gone to work and the children to school.

The third person who was a big influence in my Christian life was a Priest who had given up Parish work in order to give spiritual direction to people who sought his services in this way. He had various Centres all over the country where he invited people to visit him. I used to go and see him in Newcastle. He was my Director for fourteen years, a man of God and a man of prayer. He believed in Women's Ordination and supported a number of women who felt they had been called to the Priesthood.

These are just one or two of the people who had influence on my Christian life and I remember them very often with thanksgiving. I have greatly valued my time as a Reader in so many different ways; and in all my time in the Churches and places where I have served I have never felt rejected because I was a woman. However few the Congregation, it never mattered because as Jesus said, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them". Thanks be to God.