

## John 1:35-39      Discipleship

There is a lot in the New Testament about discipleship, and discipleship is a word we use much in Christian circles. The third point of the Baptist Union declaration of Principle says, *That it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.* The idea is that every Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

In our passage we meet two disciples of John the Baptist. John again points to Jesus as the Lamb of God encouraging, at personal cost to himself, two of his disciples to follow Jesus (John 1:35-37). Then Jesus turns and initiates a conversation, which at first sight seems strange:

**Jesus:** *what are you seeking? (NIV what do you want?)*

**Disciples:** *Rabbi (which means Teacher), where are you staying?*

**Jesus:** *Come and see*

Note first that the disciples of John address Jesus as *Rabbi*. Today a synagogue Rabbi functions in not a dissimilar way to an ordained Pastor or Vicar. But in Jesus' day a Rabbi was a travelling teacher, not a synagogue leader. They were generally from the ranks of the ordinary people such as blacksmiths, shoemakers, fishermen, and yes, carpenters! At the same time they were dedicated to God and excelled in the Scriptures. People wanted to learn from them, and at certain times of the year they would travel, teaching in synagogues and telling parables. They relied on the hospitality of others, and weren't paid. It was a great privilege to be a personal disciples of a Rabbi, to learn from him. The word *disciple* means *learner*.

Jesus was a Rabbi, and the disciples of John wanted to become His disciples. But Jesus' question is curious:

### 1. **What are you seeking?**

If we are serious in our commitment to Christ, sooner or later we will face the same kind of question. C.S. Lewis put it eloquently, like this,

*There comes a moment when the children who have been playing burglars hush suddenly ... was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion suddenly draw back. Suppose we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing he found us? So it is a sort of Rubicon. One goes across; or not. But if one does ... one may be in for anything."*

Are we just playing at discipleship, or are we serious? Are we prepared to take that step of faith to cross the Rubicon into real discipleship? There is a real cost to discipleship (Luke 14:27), yet the rewards are out of this world (Mark 10:29-31)!

### 2. **Where are you staying?**

What did the disciples of John mean? In the 1<sup>st</sup> century to be a disciple was first of all to spend time with their Rabbi: *And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach* (Mark 3:14). Discipleship starts by spending time

with Jesus, in prayer and through His word (Bible Study). The goal of discipleship was to become like the Rabbi. The goal of Christian discipleship is Christ-likeness (i.e. Christian maturity). This is a life-long pursuit.

A 1<sup>st</sup> century disciple would spend time with their Rabbi, and would begin by serving him in menial ways (cf John 4:8). By being with him they would also be learning from him, by osmosis! The emphasis was not only on knowledge, but on the whole of one's life, on character. This is a very different model of learning we are used to in the West. When we think of learning we think of a classroom, absorbing information, answering questions (ugh!) and regurgitating information in exams (and probably forgetting most of it a week later!) When we translate this into the Christian life, discipleship become educating people who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour in doctrinal truth and creedal statements. While this is not all bad, it misses the heart of the New Testament model of discipleship. We teach people about God rather than teach people how to walk with God, and there's a big difference!

A 1<sup>st</sup> century disciple would not only learn from the teaching of his Rabbi, but also from his way of life, that is, the application of his teaching. This (Eastern) model is much closer to our idea of apprenticeship.

Learning through apprenticeship takes time. We know that Jesus did and still does wonderful works of healing and deliverance. But Jesus never did a miracle to help the 12 to be better disciples. Rather he let them fail and mess up! Discipleship at the feet of Jesus of a slow, humbling and often painful process ... however it works, and the rewards are great. An illustration helps us to understand this counter-intuitive method of education:<sup>1</sup>

*"You cannot separate life from work" Shibata told Ange, his new apprentice, one day. "The way you do the most insignificant activity in your daily life will reflect in your work." Then he sent her to the rice fields to dig for clay instead of inviting her to sit down at his wheel. Her pride chafed at not being asked to demonstrate her own skill. In fact, Shibata did not allow her to throw even one piece of pottery during her six-month stay in Japan.*

*One day over lunch, Shibata's wife confided, "When you came to us, you were like a fully grown tree with big branches. We have to cut those branches for something new to be able to grow." But all Ange felt was the cutting. Still, as she toiled at her humble chores, she snatched every chance to watch the master potter at work.*

*Returning home, she felt deflated and defeated, afraid that her six months in Japan have been a complete waste. But when she sat down at her wheel, she began to sense a subtle difference. Something had changed. Then, as the kiln door opened on her new work, she marvelled at the result. Without knowing it, she had been absorbing a new way of doing things. Her eyes had gained an aesthetic sense for distinguishing excellent work from merely acceptable work. Thanks to her time with Shibata, Ange's approach to her craft had been transformed. Delightedly she caressed each new vessel, admiring how the influence of her Japanese master had blended beautifully with her own personality to transform each of her new creations.*

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<sup>1</sup> Taken From, *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*, by Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg, p52

We cannot be a true disciple of Jesus without being cut back (John 15:1-2). We come to Him as a *fully grown tree*, full of our own self importance and abilities, which has to be cut away for the new life in Christ to emerge and grow. A painful process indeed, but worth it.

### **3. *Come and see***

The disciples of John have expressed their desire to be serious disciples, and Jesus responds with an invitation which is also a call: *Come and see* (cf John 6:37). This was more than an invitation to Jesus' house for tea, or to look around his accommodation. (We don't actually know where Jesus was staying, but it seems likely to me it was Capernaum, see John 2:12). No, it was an invitation to discipleship, and to spend time with Jesus. It was the beginning of a relationship. There was an expectation that a strong bond of affection would develop between a disciple and his Rabbi. It was said that just as one candle lights another when it is brought close, so a Rabbi only teaches well when he is close to his disciple. Yet this relationship, like all relationships, only developed in stages. The disciple would learn first to serve his Master. But as the disciple began to learn *his master's business*, so the relationship would grow and change,

**John 15:15** *I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*

The call to *Come and see* is the call of Jesus for each one of us. Obedience (*come*) always comes before understanding (*seeing*). We want it the other way round. Like doubting Thomas (John 20:25) we want to see first, and then we will believe! But in true discipleship, faith comes first, and understanding follows (Proverbs 1:7).

May the Lord help us to be those who learn to walk with Jesus by spending time with Him in prayer and in His Word – true disciples of Jesus.