

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BEING WITH GOD



Session 1: Starting on the Way

What is a 'disciple' and where do we see discipleship today?

Why is being a disciple a good way of life?

What was the life of a disciple in Christ's day?

What is the aim of discipleship?

How are these aims reflected in the Way of Discipleship?

I understand becoming like Christ, and joining in doing the things God does, but how do I grow in being 'with God'?

How do the modules "work"? How do disciples grow?

How is that reflected in the 'Way of Discipleship'?

Can I really be a disciple?

Can we really disciple each other?

What will this mean for my life?



What is a 'disciple' and where do we see discipleship today?

Let's start with three more modern examples...What do these tell us about discipleship?

The Elvis fan. Paul MacLeod was possibly the most dedicated Elvis fan in the world. His house is named after Elvis's: Graceland Too. He made it look like Elvis's home. His only child is called 'Elvis Aaron Presley', and he divorced his wife when she said, "It's me or your Elvis collection." Every room in his house is literally littered with Elvis paraphernalia.

The Miley Cyrus guy. This man has 30 tattoos of Miley Cyrus, whom he claimed got him through a divorce.

Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi from Star Wars, Phantom menace.

Being a disciple is not just a Christian idea. Before and after Jesus, people were and had disciples. Plato was a disciple of Socrates in ancient Greece. Many Jewish teachers (rabbis) had a set of teachings, known as their "yoke", and disciples whom they would invite to "follow" them.

Most Jewish people saw Jesus as a rabbi, a teacher - the name they give Him 90 times in the gospels - with disciples whom He invited to, "Come, follow me".

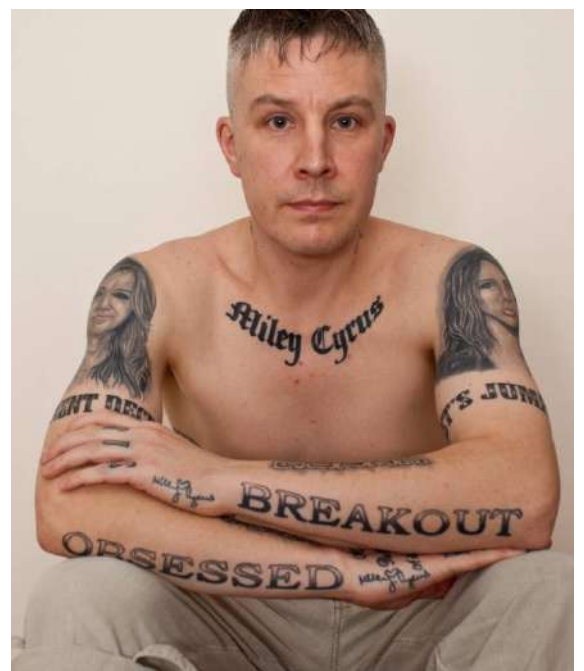
“

Whereas the word 'Christian' only appears in the Bible three times (as an insult!), the word disciple is used 268 times.”

Right at the beginning of His work the first thing Jesus did was to call disciples to be with Him

“As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.”

And right at the end of His work, Jesus told his disciples to “Go and make disciples.”





“

The call was not to ‘Believe in Him,’ but to ‘Follow Him’.”

To be a disciple of someone is about being someone who “learns as they follow.”

It is about having a close relationship with someone in which we are increasingly being with them, becoming like them, and doing the things they do.

To be a disciple is to follow, and the nature of that discipleship is defined by the One we follow.

One writer says that,

“

Being a disciple or apprentice of Jesus is a definite and obvious kind of thing. To make a mystery of it is to misunderstand it. There is no good reason why people should ever be in doubt as to whether they themselves are his students or not.”

Many churches, especially today, emphasise discipleship. Pope Francis says that the church should be a “community of missionary disciples.”



Why is being a disciple a good way of life?



There are at least five good reasons to be living as a disciple:

We all follow someone.

The examples of superfans might be unusual, but the truth is we are all centring our lives on something or someone. We live in a time when we are being constantly encouraged to put possessions and consumption at the centre of our lives. We are not living in a neutral world. We are potentially all being disciplined by advertising, shops, media etc. 24 hours a day.

As one writer puts it, "...if we don't disciple, then the culture sure will, and it's doing a good job of it. Consumerism is the alternative religion of our day." Alan Hirsch. The question isn't "Am I a disciple?" The question is "Who or what is shaping me?"

Adventure.

Christians believe being a disciple leads us to a purpose and calling. As Bear Grylls puts it, "When we pursue an adventurous path through life, inevitably we are going to have moments of hardship, doubt, struggle and pain. It goes with the territory. But for me, my simple faith has so often brought light to a dark path, joy to a cold mountain and strength to a failing body.

Believing doesn't mean we have to suddenly get all religious. I am not. And Jesus certainly wasn't. It has taken a while in my life to understand that faith is a journey, and as we trust and lean on Him, He leads us to the light - to a freer, more centred existence, free from guilt, free from crippling fear and free to start living."

Becoming fully human.

Someone once said that Jesus did not come to make us more religious but came to make us fully human. Orthodox Christians have a beautiful understanding of being a disciple called "theosis". It's not that we can "become God", but that as we draw close to God and reflect His love and life more fully, we become alive, more human as humanity was intended to be, because we have allowed God's life to fill and eventually overwhelm us.

Discipleship takes us along this road until eventually the (human) mirror is no longer seen, but only the reflected glory of God.



It's the best life you can find!

Cyrille Regis was the third black player to be capped by England, and a pioneer in the fight against racism in football. He played 614 matches and scored 158 goals in a 19-year professional career with Coventry, West Brom, Aston Villa and Wolves, which also saw him make five appearances for England. He became a Christian when he discovered that.

“

... the penny drops. It really sinks in that Christ loves me. He died for me and He rose again from the dead and this awesome sense of peace comes over me.”

He became a sports agent and remained passionate about sharing his story of faith. He said,

“I meet people all the time, some famous, some not who are all looking for hope and peace. I have learned that money cannot buy peace of mind so I simply tell people how I found hope and peace in God. The great thing about it is that anyone can have the peace that I have, you just need to know God.”



Being and making disciples is the Church's central task.

The writer Robert Warren states, “The best way to grow the church is to grow people.” In the Roman Catholic Church, writer Sherry Weddell says, “...we have seen it happen over and over. The presence of a significant number of disciples changes everything: a parish's spiritual tone, energy level, attendance, bottom line, and what parishioners ask of the leaders. ‘Disciples pray with passion. Disciples worship. Disciples love the church and serve her with energy and joy. Disciples give lavishly. Disciples hunger to learn more about their faith. Disciples fill every formation class in a parish or diocese. Disciples manifest charisms and discern vocations. They clamour to discern God's call because they long to live it. Disciples evangelise because they have really good news to share. Disciples share their faith with the children. Disciples care about the poor and bring about justice. Disciples take risks for the kingdom of God.’ So the truth is if we focus on being and making disciples first, the rest will follow. Can we agree with this...?”

“

The best decision anyone can ever make, at any point in life, in any circumstances, whoever they are, wherever they are, is to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.”

Archbishop Justin Welby

What was the life of a disciple in Christ's day? What is the aim of discipleship?



In Christ's day, and in the early church, disciples would live with and follow their rabbi so closely it was difficult to know where the life of the rabbi ended and the disciple's life started.

Jewish people said, "May you be covered with the dust of your rabbi..." May you be walking so closely with them, listening from them, watching them that at the end of each day you would be covered with the dust they kick up from the road in front of you.

Discipleship-following would lead to change – a transformation of every aspect of who we are, how we think, how we act. The best way of describing what this feels like is to think of being an apprentice to someone. This would involve three things:

Being with:

Obviously if you want to learn from a "teacher" the first thing will be that you spend as much time with them as possible.

Becoming like:

Over time you will start to become like them – their character will shape yours, their responses and thoughts will become part of the way you tick. Character change is a key part of being a disciple, and in fact, of being more fully human. This is precisely the hope that Paul expresses to the early Christians.

"May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation – the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ – for this will bring much glory and praise to God." (Philippians 1:9-11, NLT)

Joining in with:

The apprentice will gradually take on the work of the teacher, and do things the way the teacher does them.

“

An 'important way of putting this is to say that I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in the manner in which he did all that he did.'" Dallas Willard.

The aim of discipleship is always about change. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul exclaimed, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5.17).

For Christians today, as we consistently and intentionally live every aspect of our daily lives in being apprentices to Christ, we expect change in our lived experience – becoming like Him and doing the things He does.

This is completely at the heart of Anglican Christianity, which, "from its roots in Celtic and Augustinian spirituality and shaped by the European Reformation, has always been a lived-out (not a purely intellectual or spiritualized) faith. It is about following and living the ways of Jesus." (from the Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making, Anglican Communion)



I understand becoming like Christ, and joining in doing the things God does, but how do I grow in being ‘with God’?

It’s easy to see how the early disciples could be ‘with Jesus’, but what do we mean by being with God now, in our daily lives?

Firstly, it’s important to know that God is already with you. While Jesus could only ever be in one place at one time, before He went to His Father He promised, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you ...My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.... “All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

God is with us all, everywhere, because He is Spirit. The Spirit is in creation, including in each of us. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians that “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”.

Because of the Spirit, Jesus stops being removed from us, and starts being together with us. In the words of James Allison, using God’s voice - ‘we (meaning God as a trinity) will come to them and make our home with them’. (from ‘Knowing Jesus’ by James Allison)

Our part every day in being ‘with God’ is to be aware of Spirit. Making time to ‘abide’ in Jesus (John 15). Dallas Willard puts it this way:

“

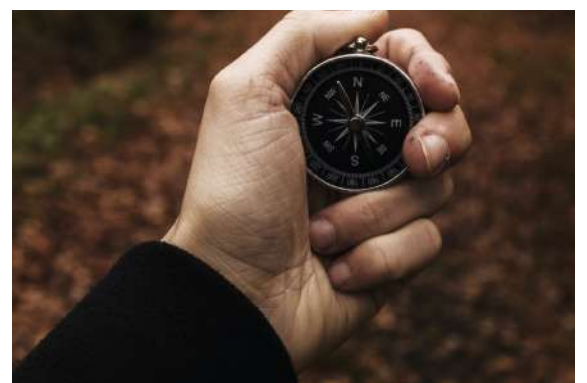
The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds. This is the fundamental secret of caring for our souls...

as we take intentional steps toward keeping God before us. Soon our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, He will become the pole star of our inward beings.”

If God is always with us, the first thing an apprentice does is to pay attention. Listening to God and responding to Him IS the heart of being a disciple.

Our first module is all about this, and as we journey together, we will always be seeking to help each other pay attention. That’s why Archbishop Rowan Williams believes, being a disciple means to be someone who keeps watching, listening and learning.

There’s no magic, or celebrity, or certificates to it. Just watching, listening and learning as an ongoing process.



How do the modules “work”?

How do disciples grow?



“From my desk at college,” writes Shane Claiborne, “it looked like some time back we had stopped living Christianity and just started studying it. If we are to make disciples, we must do more than help people acquire biblical and theological information.

Our task is not simply to study the Word of God; it's to get it off the page and into our lives. The Bible itself often tells us this. ‘Don't read it, eat it,’ God said to the prophet Ezekiel. ‘Don't speak it, live it,’ he said to Hosea. ‘You claim to know what it says, but you have no understanding of its power,’ Jesus said to the Pharisees.

‘The Word of God is living and active,’ said the writer to the Hebrews; it is meant to change us and change the people around us.”

To grow in this way there are (at least) four important elements.

We need the information and to be taught.

Jesus' method has parallels in the way people learn a new language. Firstly, it obviously involves knowing some vocabulary and grammar. There is a body of information to be absorbed. Similarly, Jesus taught His apprentices in that He gave them information. The Sermon on the Mount, Lord's Prayer, parables, the greatest commandment. They needed their minds shaped to understand what relationship God wanted with them, and the mission they were invited into.

By and large, we are very good at this in church circles and in society. But what is more helpful in actually being able to use a language is being able to listen to people speaking it, and to imitate them, sometimes with unintended results. Information alone won't make you a speaker.

Modelling and imitation is at the heart of apprentice-style learning.

Jesus inviting his disciples to live life as He lived it. He demonstrated everything He taught – how to pray, to heal, to teach, to love enemies. They learnt by observing Him. Most famously He did this at the last supper, when having washed their feet He said, “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

I would say that the people who have had most influence on me are the ones whose lives I have sought to imitate.

“

Discipleship is more caught than taught. ”

But I'll tell you how language really improves. By living in the country!

When you have to actually use your knowledge,

improvise, immerse yourself in the culture, down the market, in the college, the words you have read on the page, and repeated after other people, actually start to become a living language. Jesus taught his apprentices, he demonstrated, but then He sent them out on His mission. They learnt on the way.

It's common educational wisdom in action: as the proverb says, “Tell me, I'll forget. Show me, I'll remember. Involve me, I'll understand.”

How is that reflected in the 'Way of Discipleship'?



Because the aim is transformation, each session combines this mixture of content, modelling, and follow-up action...with some feedback to each other (over time).

Incidentally, the modules are shaped around apprenticeship, but they also reflect how we know God – as Father (Being with God), as Son (Becoming like Christ), as Spirit (Joining in with the Spirit).

The modules shape us in knowledge, character, and skills. All the material is online for you to access, and there is plenty more material on each area should you want to pursue more.

Can I really be a disciple?

If we are not asking this question sometimes, then we are probably not paying attention...But the answer is, of course! Peter's story is helpful – it's a timeless story of change and growth.

He starts his relationship with Jesus as one of his enthusiastic followers, ready to die for Him, and always there with the 'right' answers. But he betrays Jesus three times in the dark of night. Yet after Jesus is raised, He reinstates Peter, putting him in charge of His followers, forgiving him, and helping him grow through mistakes.

Most apprentices will be similar – times of wild passion, then doubt, or failure...eventually shaping us as we become more like our rabbi. Be encouraged by knowing...

Like Peter, most of the disciples had their successes and failures.

The disciples Jesus chose came from the bottom of the social ladder.

God always starts where you are at – you never need to wait until you are "ready".

They were called disciples from day one – learners as they followed.

We come to God, and we grow, in different ways. There are four stories in the book of Acts which illustrate some of these different journeys.

Some come because of the influence of a particular person – see Philip and the Ethiopian – Acts 8: 26-39.

Some grow up as disciples, inheriting faith from their family – see the Philippian jailer story in Acts 16: 22-34.

Some are gradually drawn into church and start the Way of Discipleship step by step – see the life of the early church in Acts 2: 42-47.

Some hear a message and the penny drops in a moment - see Paul preaching to people who have never heard before in Acts 17: 22-34.

We go through different stages in life, and on our faith journey.

Finally we change through training, not trying. The Way of Discipleship is about training us in ways of life that help us transform over time.



Can we really disciple each other?



Jesus told us to “make disciples”. The call was given to every disciple.

The writer Bob Ronglien says, “...followers of Jesus are meant to look like a sheep from the front and a shepherd from the back. They look like a sheep from the front because they are following someone who is helping them learn how to follow Jesus. Likewise, they look like a shepherd from the back because they’re helping others learn how to follow Jesus.”

But we may worry that we don’t have the right to apprentice others, as we either don’t feel worthy, or we don’t want to judge others. There is a balance here. We certainly can’t judge anyone, both because of our own state, and because we can never truly know what is happening in someone’s heart.

But just because we can’t see what is happening inside, as Sherry Wedell writes, “This does not mean that no fruits of personal faith are observable from the outside. And it certainly does not mean that a dramatic and widespread absence of these fruits in the community overall cannot be recognised and addressed.”

She continues, “...let me stress that we cannot bring anyone to faith through pressure, guilt, argument or cleverness. Conversion and true faith are works of the Holy Spirit. But it is also true that we can, by our responses, help or hinder another’s journey.”

We can help others, or we can hinder them. Paul knew that he was a model for others, so when writing to his disciples in Corinth he said simply: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1)

Bob Ronglien writes, “The call to make disciples is a call to point people towards Jesus by the fallible example of our lives. If people are only imitating us, they will get a degraded version of Jesus.

“

People don’t need a perfect example of Jesus - they just need a living example. Paul would not let Timothy use his age as an excuse for not inviting people to imitate him.”



What will this mean for my life?



If you want to grow in being an apprentice – being with God, becoming like Christ, and joining in with the Spirit, there needs to be something intentional about it.

As Sherry Wedell writes, “Discipleship is never unconscious. No one voluntarily sheds his or her job, home, and whole way of life accidentally or unconsciously. Simon Peter’s drop the net decision is what we mean by intentional....Going with Jesus meant visiting places these fishermen, and the women who accompanied them, would probably never have visited otherwise.”

If we make that choice, day by day, He will transform us. The spirit of the Way of Discipleship is to respond to the exciting, life-changing vision that someone like the priest Robert Capon set out:

“If Christianity is simply about being nice, I’m not interested. What happened to radical Christianity, the un-nice brand of Christianity that turned the world upside-down? What happened to the category-smashing, life-threatening, anti-institutional gospel that spread through the first century like wildfire and was considered (by those in power) dangerous?”



What happened to the kind of Christians whose hearts were on fire, who had no fear, who spoke the truth no matter what the consequence, who made the world uncomfortable, who were willing to follow Jesus wherever He went?

What happened to the kind of Christians who were filled with passion and gratitude, and who every day were unable to get over the grace of God?

“

I’m ready for a Christianity that ‘ruins’ my life, that captures my heart and makes me uncomfortable. I want to be filled with an astonishment which is so captivating that I am considered wild and unpredictable and ... well ... dangerous.”

Yes, I want to be ‘dangerous’ to a dull and boring religion. I want a faith that is considered ‘dangerous’ by our predictable and monotonous culture.”

(“Dangerous Wonder” by Mike Yaconelli, Hodder & Stoughton 1999)