

Introduction

We discover what's involved in our Christian commitment not (of course!) by reading books about it but by the daily effort to live in a way that allows Jesus Christ to come through in our lives; we are caught up in the task of showing that what we say is *credible*. And at the same time, it is this daily effort to be 'transparent' to Christ that teaches us all over again what it means to say that we are Christians.

So 'being disciples' means at least two things. It means very simply going on asking whether what we do, how we think and speak and act, is open to Christ and Christ's Spirit; developing the skills of asking ourselves the difficult questions about our consistency and honesty, about how seriously we take what we say. And it is also about how we as a Church go on being a *learning community*, how we grow in depth of relation with each other and God. The addresses collected in this little book – most of them originally delivered to audiences of lay Christians of all ages and backgrounds – are all in their different ways about these issues, and I hope very much that they may be a starting point for exploring ways in which we can go on growing in the life that Jesus shares with us, so that we can become signs of life and hope in our world. My thanks to those who listened to these talks and offered perspectives, comments and challenges that helped me see more clearly.

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Being disciples

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. (John 1.36–39)

Discipleship, as the title of this book indicates, is a state of being. Discipleship is about how we live; not just the decisions we make, not just the things we believe, but a state of being. It's very telling that, at the very beginning of John's Gospel (John 1.38–39), when the two disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus they say, 'Rabbi, where are you staying?' Jesus says, 'Come and see', and they stay with him for the rest of the day. The Gospel teaches us that the bottom line in thinking about discipleship has something to do with this *staying*. Later on in the same Gospel (especially John 15) the same language of 'staying'

or 'abiding', as it is often translated, is used again to describe the ideal relation of the disciple to Jesus: 'Abide in me', he says; 'abide in my love' (John 15.4, 9).

In other words, what makes you a disciple is not turning up from time to time. Discipleship may literally mean 'being a student', in the strict Greek sense of the word, but it doesn't mean turning up once a week for a course (or even a sermon). It's not an intermittent state; it's a relationship that continues. The truth is that, in the ancient world, being a 'student' was rather more like that than it is these days. If you said to a modern prospective student that the essence of being a student was to hang on your teacher's every word, to follow in his or her steps, to sleep outside their door in order not to miss any pearls of wisdom falling from their lips, to watch how they conduct themselves at the table, how they conduct themselves in the street, you might not get a very warm response. But in the ancient world, it was rather more like that. To be the student of a teacher was to commit yourself to living in the same atmosphere and breathing the same air; there was nothing intermittent about it.

Being a 'disciple', a learner, in that sense is a state of being in which you are looking and listening without interruption. It's much more like, for instance, the condition of the novice monks we read about in the sayings of the Desert Fathers, who hang around hoping that they will get the point, occasionally saying desperately to the older

monks, 'Give us a word, Father,' and at last the older monk says something really profound like, 'Weep for your sins,' followed by six weeks of silence. Or indeed the relationship between (even today) the Buddhist novice and the master in a Zen community, where something similar applies. You are hanging around; you are watching; you are absorbing a way of being that you are starting to share. You learn by sharing life; you learn by looking and listening.

So that little exchange at the beginning of John's Gospel ("Rabbi, where are you staying?" ... "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day') is quite a good beginning for thinking about discipleship. It's no accident that John puts it right at the beginning of his Gospel. If we're going to understand what he has to say to us about discipleship, we have to understand about abiding and sharing, this 'non-intermittent' quality in being a disciple.

Being aware and attentive

I shall have a little more to say about that sharing a place, an atmosphere, a state of being. But for now let's just stay with what it involves and think a little about discipleship as a state of *awareness*. The disciple is not there to jot down ideas and then go away and think about them. The disciple is where he or she is in order to be changed; so that the way in which he or she sees and experiences the whole world changes.