

# A meditation on the journey of discipleship

*Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ – Dietrich Bonhoeffer*  
Revd Dr Alison Morgan

## What is a Christian disciple?

It's a term we often use, but rarely think about carefully. Like an arrow fired from a distance at a very slightly inaccurate angle, the word disciple somehow seems to have strayed further and further away from its target as the centuries have gone by. What do you think of when you consider the word 'disciple'? Is it a term you would apply to yourself?

*Discipleship is the irreplaceable and lifelong task of becoming like Jesus by embodying his message – Alan Hirsch*



## Student, or apprentice?

Our English word 'disciple' means 'a person who learns', and we often understand discipleship as a process of learning – learning which involves study. So for us, to grow in discipleship often means to grow in knowledge and understanding, particularly of the Bible. But when we read the Bible, we don't actually see Jesus's disciples engaged in study; we see them being trained to do the things that Jesus did. They were more like apprentices than like disciples. Are you learning to do the things that Jesus did?



*The one who believes in me will do the works that I do – Jesus*

*Instead of asking yourself whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day done one thing because he said, 'Do it,' or once abstained because he said 'Do not do it.' It is simply absurd to say you believe, or even want to believe in him, if you do not do anything he tells you – George MacDonald*

## Knowing, or becoming?

When we decide to follow Jesus, we are given the Holy Spirit as our guide and teacher. Through the presence of the Spirit in our lives, we are enabled to grow and change. We become more and more like Jesus himself, and we gradually acquire the inner beauty of a person being made clean from the inside out. Meditate on this thought:

*In God we are not condemned or defined, but forever becoming - Gunilla Norris*



## Alone, or together?

We are used to thinking about life in individual terms, and this colours our attitude to faith too. But in the New Testament we see something rather different. Jesus did not recruit individuals, he recruited a group – a group who would, for three years, do everything together. He taught them to love one another, to minister alongside one another, to depend on one another. When he left them, he sent the Holy Spirit to be with them instead, and the Holy Spirit equipped them to minister not as individuals but as connected branches of a single vine, as different parts of a single body.



What about you – do you belong to a community which can pray, learn and minister together?

*We have nothing to share with the world other than what we are sharing with each other – Jim Wallis*

## The plural of disciple is church

The word 'disciple' is used throughout the Gospels and the Book of Acts – but never in the Epistles. Why is this? Partly to make it absolutely clear that discipleship is first and foremost about following Jesus. But there's another reason too. Peter, James and John have a new word to talk about discipleship – it's the word 'church'. Church is a group word – it refers to a group of people who have been called to follow Jesus together. Just as we talk about individual houses making up a village, so we talk about individual disciples making up a church. The plural of disciple is not disciples – it's church. This meaning is buried in our language; the English word church means 'of the Lord'.



Would you describe your church as a group of disciples committed to following Jesus?

*Church is what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other – Rowan Williams*

## A lifelong journey

To be a disciple of Jesus was to travel, and so it has always been. Before the word 'Christian' was invented, the disciples of Jesus were known as followers of 'The Way'. Christian discipleship is not about knowing things, believing things, attending things, or belonging to things – it's about setting out on a shared journey, a journey which will change who we are and the way we live our lives, a journey which begins here but will carry us ultimately into another world. Discipleship is a journey in which we learn gradually to move into the space made available to us by Jesus.



*The UK will never be reached until we begin to cultivate open, authentic, learning and praying communities that are focussed on making whole-life disciples who live and share the gospel wherever they relate to people in their daily lives – Mark Greene*

## It's not meant to be easy...

*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? - Jesus*



What is the cost of discipleship for you?

*I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker - Soren Kierkegaard*

## Praying for grace

*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness – St Paul*

Reflect on the things you have been praying about as you have considered your own journey of discipleship – apprenticeship, becoming, community, journey, cost. What is the key element for which you need to ask for God's grace?



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For further reading see my book *Following Jesus : The Plural of Disciple is Church* – available from The Mathetes Trust (<https://mathetestrust.org/>)