Discipleship – Following Jesus

I wonder what image you have of Jesus and his disciples? Do you see him as the pioneer, forging ahead as the unique and lone hero, as he and the disciples travel around Galilee and then to Jerusalem; or do you tend to imagine them together in a more relaxed setting, perhaps after hard day, sitting by the firelight as Jesus tells them stories of the Kingdom of God?

Both images reflect aspects of the portrait of Jesus which we find in Matthew's Gospel, but I have a hunch that we tend to focus more on Jesus as the lone pioneer of faith, if only because in the week of the passion that's what he was. Matthew's Gospel is quite clear that Jesus, and only Jesus, could accomplish the salvation of the world on the cross. The disciples, we hardly need reminding, all forsook him and fled. Yet in the earlier part of his ministry, as he brought the Kingdom of God to Galilee, Jesus quite clearly worked in partnership with the team he called to be around him. If you look at Matthew 9.35-10.16, you can see how Jesus chose the twelve to go out and bring the Kingdom in just the same way that he had: 'Proclaim the good news: "The Kingdom of Heaven has come close". Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons' (Matt. 10.7-8). As someone once said, they're called to be PhDs – Preaching the Kingdom, Healing the sick and Delivering people from evil. It's the same task that Jesus himself was called to.

So being a disciple of Jesus means being called to do the same kinds of things that he did, though preaching, healing and delivering from evil may take different forms in 21st-century Coventry and Warwickshire than they did in 1st-century Galilee. How did Jesus get people ready to take on this awesome responsibility? There's a clue in the name, for 'disciple' means 'a learner'.

The first thing to notice is that Jesus chose his disciples. In the ancient world disciples would choose a teacher and pay them a fee. Jesus did the opposite: he called his disciples to come and follow him (see Matt. 4.12-23). Having chosen them, he got them to follow him so that they could watch him in action. Though he seems to have given them a good deal of teaching (the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, Matt.5-7), just as important was practical experience, seeing Jesus heal at close quarters for example. Probably they were eager to get out and get on with the job, but they had not seen everything yet. They had to wait until Jesus had experienced the horrific agony of the cross and themselves see, astonished, the risen Jesus return to them on the first Easter day before they were at last ready to take on the work of bringing the Kingdom without Jesus physically beside them, but inspiring them by the Holy Spirit every step of the way. What did Jesus charge them to do? Make disciples themselves (Matt. 28.16-20).

To be Jesus' disciples today we need to follow the same process. Knowing we are called to follow Jesus is the first step, then working under the guidance of someone else as we learn to discern God at work, often learning the hard way the cost of following Jesus, before launching out on our own to begin the process again, but this time calling others to become Jesus' disciples and to see God at work before they too are able to set off and find more disciples...

Recommended: Andrew Watson *The Fourfold Leadership of Jesus: Come, Follow, Wait, Go* (Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008)

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