

Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District Synod

12th September 2015

Dare to Dream

Follow me!¹ The adventure of Christian discipleship began with these two simple yet life changing, world changing, words. Ordinary people in the midst of their everyday lives were captivated by the person of Jesus and set out on a journey that would change both them and the course of human history.

The call of Jesus to discipleship rang clear on the shores of Lake Galilee. And of course around the world millions of people today are still hearing that call and setting out on the adventure of Christian discipleship. But what does that look like, involve and mean in the unfolding 21st century?

Well for one person in our District it looks a bit like this.

I first met Rachel Matthews when she phoned up out of the blue one day explaining that she would like to be confirmed. Rachel had been to Sunday School at Kingswinford and like many teenagers and young adults drifted away from Church during those transitional years. It just so happened that when she phoned me I was thinking of running an Alpha course for the first time so quick to spot an opportunity I asked Rachel if she would like to be part of the group. She agreed and brought her sister with her. It was a transformative experience for her through which she clearly heard the call of Jesus to follow and renewed her journey with him. Since then the adventure of discipleship has taken her to all sorts of places. Reflecting on that adventure Rachel says:-

'God has given me a heart for mission and a love for people and he has placed me in many unexpected places to explore those - I worked for BBC Radio 4 for over a decade and spent six years with the Fresh Expressions team with whom I hosted a day with Rowan Williams at Holy Trinity Brompton. By contrast last year I spent the Christmas holidays in the mayhem of Merry Hill, working at Next. I've shared my faith in each place I've been in and simply don't know the impact that has had, but I trust God gave me the right words at the right time dependent on the situation!

¹ Mark 1:17, Matthew 4:19

When I began my work as Children and Family's Worker within the Vale of Stour Circuit I was overwhelmed by the amount of people in my community needing to know God's love for them... then God reminded me, I wasn't doing this alone - he is in the driving seat and all I need to do is trust him and go along for the ride.

Last year God asked me to go to Kilimanjaro... I wasn't sure why, but with hindsight a few months later I know that this was His gift to me'.

We'll return to Kilimanjaro with Rachel shortly but at this point I'd just like to note how the adventure of following Jesus involves the *whole* of life. Whether we are at Next, Radio 4, caring for our family, our neighbours or those seeking sanctuary, or atop the highest mountain in Africa raising funds for Compassion, it is all an outworking of our discipleship.

Holiness and Risk

As Methodist Christians we have a particular understanding that the adventure of Discipleship is characterised by holiness and risk. A holiness that is a life of embodied grace. A sacramental life, lived in brokenness, blessedness, sharing and giving, focussed, and nurtured in the sacramentality of the Lord's Supper. workshop.

Discipleship is a personal calling, and a corporate calling, as Alison Morgan reminds us in her recent book *The Plural of Disciple is Church*.

Individually and collectively we are called to a risk taking discipleship. Risks including;

- Letting go of the familiar to embrace the new things God is calling us to be and do.
- Struggling to live a holy life at work when our values may be challenged.
- Daring to disagree with the Daily Mail. And daring to speak up for life, love and justice (here a picture of Ayan Kudi's body was shown).
- Making friends with those of other faiths. Barbara Easton shared this story with me:-

- A group of Muslims bought a piece of land next to Heartsong Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, to build a Mosque and Community Centre. The church thought hard about how to react. They put up a big

notice outside telling their Muslim neighbours that they were welcome. The Muslims were so surprised and pleased they went to talk to the minister, who asked what his Church could do to help them. They asked if they could rent a little room as temporary accommodation – he let them have the biggest room they had. When they had a church barbeque they bought halal meat so they could invite the Muslims. They began to work together on neighbourhood projects to help the poor.

- Meanwhile a journalist from CNN alleged that they never published good news stories about Muslims because there aren't any. Someone challenged them to report what was happening at Heartsong so they made a 90 second video about the Church which was looped on the CNN news channel over the course of a day.
- A few days later the minister had a phone call from Kashmir. The caller said that he and his friends had been sitting in a café watching CNN when the story about the Muslims and the Christians came on. They were speechless when they saw it because they had been told that all Americans hated Muslims. They did not think Christians could get on with Muslims. They talked about what they could do in response to what they had seen of the Methodists at Heartsong and they decided that they should take care of the little Christian Church in their community. They went and cleaned the Church inside and out, washing off the offensive graffiti which had been daubed there. They made the minister a promise that, for the rest of their lives, they would take care of the Christians in their community as the people at Heartsong had taken care of their Muslim neighbours.

➤ Where has the adventure of Discipleship taken you taken you recently?
Literal where or a metaphorical where.

or

➤ What holy risks might God be calling you to take as an outworking of your Discipleship, individually or collectively?

Before we think a little about the nurture of adventurous discipleship we need to pause and remember that discipleship is cruciform. That is it's about following the one who says

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'²

The cross can take many forms. For all there will be times of struggle and suffering and in the UK we have much to learn from our brothers and sisters around the world; in Zimbabwe, in Rwanda and those suffering most horribly in Iraq and Syria whose faithfulness and fortitude inspire us and whose plights prompt our praying, campaigning and action.

Reflecting on her climb of Kilimanjaro Rachel says it has become a metaphor for her journey of faith. She says:-

The trek to the top of the mountain, took 4 days and 1 night... Some days, the walking was easy, the sun shined on my face and I felt I could manage anything. Other days, it was difficult, with steep hills to climb and difficult terrain underfoot.

Many times, it was just simply a case of putting one foot in front of another. A perfect example of this, was the penultimate day of walking, when we were told we had an easy walk ahead of us, as we headed towards base camp at the summit.

The walk was estimated at 3 hours, but after 5 hours of trekking we weren't anywhere near our destination. There was wind whipping across our faces, a boring cloudy landscape surrounding us and as we walked in one single line for hours upon hours we began to feel fed up and frustrated. Why wasn't this turning out as we had expected? Why was it taking so long? Where on earth was the campsite?

We knew we would need our energy for that same evening when we would climb to the summit in freezing temperatures at midnight, so why was this taking us twice as long?

We trekked in single file and then all of a sudden the clouds shifted and ahead of us, we saw the campsite shining ahead. It literally peeped through the

² Matthew 16.24

clouds and as quick as it appeared - disappeared once again. I remember it so clearly, it felt like a gift from God... a glimpse of what was to come and it gave us all the encouragement we needed to, to keep on putting one foot in front of another 'pole, pole' (slowly, slowly in Swahili) and we knew eventually we would get there.

Nurturing Discipleship

So given that discipleship is an adventure and a challenge, a risk and cross shaped, a personal and a collective calling with glimpses of glory that energise and inspire us, how *do we* nurture discipleship in a way that is both holy and fruitful?

I'd briefly like to share two perspectives.

The first comes from our President Elect Roger Walton. Now Roger as you know has spent many years in Christian Education most notably as Director of the Wesley Study Centre in Durham. He knows how important education is in the formation of disciples but in his book *Disciples Together* he suggests that sometimes we have focussed *too much* attention on education when it comes to the nurture of disciples and given it a primacy that is not actually in keeping with what it is to be a disciple.

The Greek word *mathetes* from which we get our word disciple literally means one who learns *as they follow*. So the primacy is in the activity of following which the activity of learning supports not the other way round.

Roger argues that when it comes to forming disciples there are three primary formative energies.

1. Mission. Something that is emphasised in Mark's Gospel.
2. Worship. Which is emphasised by Luke.
3. Intentional Christian Community. Which is emphasised by John.

All of these supported by intentional education or learning. Which is a distinctive emphasis of Matthew.

Given that his previous book was called *the Reflective Disciple* Roger suggests that we are formed most effectively when we are *active* in mission, worship and intentional community and then *reflect* upon these so that they become ever more fruitful activities.

Holy Habits

So that very briefly is Roger's perspective. And now I'd like to share one of my own that I have been working on for some years now and is taking shape in a programme that I have helped to develop in Birmingham and which will soon start to be translated into a Connexional resource, and a Book that I wrote on sabbatical and which will be launched in the Spring.

It's called Holy Habits and no it's not a Nun's clothing catalogue! Rather it is an exploration and reworking of ten timeless habits of discipleship that we see in Luke's pen portrait of the very first Christian community in Acts 2.

The ten habits are:-

1. Biblical teaching.
2. Fellowship.
3. Breaking of bread.
4. Prayer.
5. Giving.
6. Service – especially of the poorest.
7. Eating together.
8. Gladness and generosity.
9. Worship.
10. Making more disciples – with the particularly urgent task of making more younger disciples.

Dare to dream

Einstein once said that what you can't imagine you will never see. One of the gifts of the Spirit that is being rediscovered in these days is that of prophetic imagination. I invite you to explore that gift for a moment and dare to dream.

When the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, fulfilling the ancient prophecy of Joel, there was a release of energy, creativity and imagination. Younger people were fired with new Kingdom vision. Older people were renewed by dreams of what could be.

A movement that just a few weeks before had seemed to die on a dark Friday afternoon was on fire with life, joy and fresh belief in what was possible.

Earlier this year I visited friends who live in Portland, Dorset. They live near to the waters that were used for sailing and windsurfing at the 2012 Olympics. As I drove back across the causeway to the mainland I found myself being overtaken by a windsurfer skilfully catching the power of the wind in his sails. I checked my speedometer and saw that I was doing 50 mph. Which meant he was doing more.....

Oh that we might catch again the wind of the Spirit as that windsurfer caught the wind blowing across the water that day. Oh that we might be fired with fresh imagination, dreams and vision of how the world could be if the adventure of following Jesus was lived more fully in these days.

We live in a beautiful world with dark shadows, a world of plenty but with too much poverty, a world with glimpses of heaven and ghettos of hell, a world that has never been so connected or so lonely.

I invite you to dream of how this world could be if you and the communities of which you are part lived more fully the adventure of following Jesus and the holy habits of discipleship. Imagine how your world, your home, your place of work, your neighbourhood could be if daily life revolved around giving not getting, serving not selfish ambition, gladness and generosity rather than bitterness and envy.

Imagine your home, your street, your place of work, the world living by biblical teaching out of which God is honoured, creation is cared for, strangers become friends. Imagine a world where truth and goodness prevail. Where people, asking what the Lord requires of us, do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.³

Imagine fellowship being welcoming and deep, warm and challenging, supportive and transforming. Mini Kingdom communities that fulfil the promise of Jesus: 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'⁴ Communities that counter the 21st century epidemic of loneliness. Communities that build up the body of Christ. Holy communities that heal and make whole.

³ Micah 6.8

⁴ John 13.35

Imagine the feeding of the 5000 being re-enacted every day as bread is broken and shared on park benches, in the market place, at the roadside, at the refuge welcome centre. Imagine the presence of Jesus being revealed when bread is blessed and broken as companions walk together, as housebound saints invite their neighbours round, as Messy kids offer bread to their parents and carers. Imagine creative celebrations of the Lord's Supper that renew the worshipping community and send out missionary disciples full of love and purpose.

Imagine prayer becoming as natural as breathing. Imagine a prayerful way of life transforming your vision so that you see glimpses of God all around, the sacred in the secular, the potential for good. Imagine your staffroom, shop floor, boardroom or changing room being touched by the holiness of the prayers you pray. Imagine prayer transcending tribes and cultures, breaking down walls and barriers, paving the pathway to a just and peaceful world.

Imagine your home, your street, your place of work, the world being keener to give than to get. Where what is mine is yours if you need it. Imagine a church know more for giving than asking – and imagine the queue at the door! Imagine more children finding loving homes, more lonely elderly people enjoying the companionship of a weekly visit from a neighbour. Imagine the millennial goals being realised as richer nations remodel unjust systems. Imagine the day when poverty is over.

Imagine the promise of Deuteronomy 15.4 being fulfilled again with no one in need among you. Imagine people campaigning and voting for the interests of others rather than seeking to preserve and protect their own interests. Imagine church buildings open 24/7 in service of the community where the words 'All Are Welcome' are really true. Imagine bosses kneeling at the feet of their staff literally or metaphorically to serve those they lead, valuing them as equals.

Imagine banquets and parties of good food and drink. Imagine newcomers to the neighbourhood being invited to a meal and made to feel welcome. Imagine families eating together around a table, sharing stories, saying grace, taking their time. Imagine different ethnicities and cultures finding joy and delight in tasting each other's signature dishes. Imagine the day when there will be a harvest for the world and a harvest supper for all.

Imagine a world, a church, where gladness prevails and cynicism is banished! Imagine the sight of smiles and the sound of laughter, the warmth of hugs and

tears of joy as people are generous with their compliments and thanks. Imagine communities of affirmation and appreciation where gifts are honoured and celebrated, not envied. Imagine younger people generously giving time to care for older people. And imagine older people generously saying to younger people, you lead us into the future.

Imagine the whole of life being offered in worship. God being glorified in the harvesting of the crop, the styling of the hair, the satellite being launched. Imagine gatherings for worship bursting with creativity that do lead to people being lost in wonder, love and praise. Imagine worship that brings the hurts of the world to the heart of God and that inspires the worshippers to go out and touch that world with holy, healing hands.

And imagine how things would be if more disciples were made day by day to live out these holy transformational habits. If every disciple of Jesus invited just one other to 'come and see', to come and find out more about the one who loves them, died and rose for them and longs to give them life in all its fullness.

Crazy? Ridiculous? Well so was a bunch of fishermen leaving their nets to follow a young wandering rabbi embarking on what became a life changing, world transforming holy adventure.

Just a dream? Well so was Martin Luther King's dream that 'one day right here in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers'. But it came true.

Impossible? Well ten years ago so was the idea that Messy Church could mean anything more than a complaint about how the youth club had left the building. But this week the 3000th Messy Church was registered. All thank to the vision drive and inspiration of Lucy Moore.

Follow Me

'Follow me' says Jesus. Two simple yet life changing, world changing, words. Dare to dream what you can be and do, as renewed by the Spirit you follow afresh the one who loves you, calls you and walks with you. Dare to dream of how your home, church, community, workplace, world can be transformed as you live out the Holy Habits in partnership with the Holy Community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

'Follow me' says Jesus. It's time to take the next step.

- What might that next step be for you? Personally or as a church?
- Is there one of the Holy Habits that you need to give particular attention to?

Andrew Roberts

14.9.15

Please note the final part of this address (*Dare to Dream*) is taken from the final chapter of my forthcoming book *Holy Habits* which will be published in early 2016 by Malcolm Down Publishing. If you quote from the address I'd be grateful if you would acknowledge the source.

When the book is published I will be able to offer copies at a discount. The retail price will be £7.99. I can offer it for less and even more of a discount if 5 or more copies are ordered at the same time. If you would like to reserve your copy please email me via amr14@btinternet.com

The call to Christian discipleship is a call to adventure. Holy Habits explores the nature of that adventure through a rich mix of biblical material and inspiring stories. The nurturing role of the ten holy habits of discipleship as seen in Acts 2 is then explored. The ten habits are: biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer, giving, service, eating together, gladness and generosity, worship and making more disciples. Each chapter has suggestions for further reflection and action that can be used individually or by smaller or larger Christian communities.