

Disciples in the making

When I was 17 years old, and learning to drive first time round, I made one fundamental error. I looked through the local newspaper and chose a driving instructor who advertised, "Lowest prices guaranteed!" He was with the 'L Pass-o' driving school, which should have made me very suspicious in itself, but I was young and optimistic and paying for lessons by working part time in a factory making toilet seats for aeroplanes. At first, things went quite well. The instructor didn't say a lot. Often he didn't say anything at all, and I drove along very carefully and very slowly in a straight line, peering cautiously over the wheel. Then came the fateful day when I encountered my first roundabout. I saw it coming towards me and waited for some instructions. Silence from the passenger seat. Closer and closer it came. Did I turn left or right? Eventually, I took my eyes off the road, called out to the instructor and looked over. And there he was, passed out and snoring slightly against the left window. So I did the only thing that seemed sensible with a queue of traffic behind me. I drove right up into the

centre of the roundabout, abandoned the car and ran the three miles home.

Later I plucked up the courage to talk to the driving instructor again. He told me, rather shamefacedly, that he suffered from narcolepsy, and that he would fall asleep at odd times with little notice – but in his experience, most learner drivers found it quite soothing. Anyway, he said, "I thought you'd be fine on your own."

"I thought you'd be fine on your own". This is the exact opposite of the message that Jesus gives in Matthew 28. Instead he says, "I am with you always, until the end of the age." There's a theory that says disciples are learners – the word we translate 'disciple' means a student or a pupil or a trainee. We sometimes imagine a disciple being a bit like a learner driver. You observe carefully, memorise the road code, absorb those little rules which help you remember what to do – mirror, signal, brake – then very tentatively take off into traffic. You know you've succeeded when you

pass the driving test and for the first time they let you take the car out all on your own.

But that's where the analogy falls down. Disciples never learn to do without Christ – or if they do, something has gone horribly wrong. Instead, you apprentice yourself to Jesus for life, because you're not just aiming to absorb his teaching, but to be transformed so you become, little by little, more like him. Jesus trained his first followers who lived, ate, argued, worked and travelled with him. As the gospel portraits show us, often they didn't get it – they still don't understand what his teaching means; they are stubborn about doing as he asks them; they are tired and distracted as in the garden of Gethsemane, or manipulative and nakedly ambitious, as when James and John seek places of authority in the Kingdom. But in a way, that should actually encourage us. After experiencing the power of Jesus' resurrection, this same bunch of mediocrities and losers are transformed. At the heart of being a disciple, then, is being close enough to the master teacher to become like that person.

The Great Commission reminds us again that we are to be where Jesus is, to help other people 'get' Jesus and to encourage them into the church, which is that varied body of believers whose lives have been transformed by

the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's a decisive moment: the disciples have been through the sheer agony of Jesus' death and those almost heart-stopping moments when they realised he had been raised from the dead. Now they gather on a mountain top, and it becomes clear that this is the last time they will see Jesus in the old familiar way. What happens next? Does all the energy just seep away? How will they keep going? It's no wonder, perhaps, that some doubted. But then Jesus reassures them. He is not going to leave them alone. He'll be right with them to the end.

Like the first disciples, we are people of the resurrection. Resurrection faith isn't just a matter of believing that a dead body came back to life. It means knowing that this event heals a relationship between you and God. Easter means we have another chance to be the people God created us to be. We can start doing that at any moment, even after we think it's too late.

Disciples are learners because we haven't quite got it yet, and we probably never will. We're still learning what faith is all about. We are still learning what it means to believe in Jesus Christ and how our lives change because of him.

What do we allow people to see in us? Confident, smart, well-polished religious people who know all the answers

and all the formulae? Or people who, because of Jesus, are learning day after day, again and again, to believe in God as if for the first time? Believing in God is the most significant and transforming, joyful and terrifying, enterprise that is possible for us to be a part of. Because the God in whom we are learning to believe day after day is the God who is not afraid to be our God; not afraid to be in the middle of our world of suffering and stress; not afraid to be human with us.

Read Matthew 28:16-20

Notes on the text

Matthew began his gospel with a genealogy in chapter one, anchoring the life-story of Jesus into the history of Israel. He ends his gospel with a commissioning which mentions 'all nations'. The story of Jesus will continue through the stories of his disciples. Their job is to continue the work of Jesus in the world.

'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

A paraphrase of these words could go like this: "You have been my disciples and learned much from me. Now I want you to go through the rest of the world inviting people to follow me. Welcome them into your band through baptism. Teach them what I have taught you. Never forget, whatever happens, I will be with you."

It is easy to grasp the concept of the mission of Jesus expanding and the community of disciples growing in numbers. Harder to understand is what it means to 'make disciples.' In this case a little digging into the Greek for 'make disciples' may help us.

Matheteusatei is rarely found in the New Testament: just four times, and three of those are in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 13:52; 27:57; 28:19, Acts 14:21).

Matthew 13:52: '... every scribe who has been trained (lit. who has been discipled) for the kingdom of heaven ...'

Matthew 27:57: '... Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus (lit. who also himself was discipled to Jesus).'

Acts 14:21: 'After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples ...'

Reading these verses alongside Matthew 28:19, we can build a picture of what 'making disciples' involves. People hear the gospel and respond to its message by committing

themselves to Jesus. They are taught about Jesus and taught the teaching of Jesus. Their response to the gospel sets them on a path of following Jesus and learning from Jesus. On that path other disciples lead and encourage new disciples forward in their life with Christ.

Questions

- What challenges you most about this passage? Why?
- What appeals most about being a disciple today?
- What is most uncomfortable about being a disciple today?
- What is your role in making disciples?

Prayer together

- Spend some time in silence reflecting on what is challenging and encouraging in this study.
- As appropriate share requests for prayer together.