

Discipleship

Mark 8: 27-38

We may have heard several sermons on discipleship and possibly read several spiritual books on discipleship. What more can I say? How can I be of help? Well these were the questions as I was standing in the picket lines couple of days back, protesting against the proposed changes to pension schemes for the university lecturers. So my theological interpretation might be skewed!

In Indian cultural context there is a long tradition of *guru-shishya* relationship. This practice is found in many Asian religions. The *guru* is seen as the source of knowledge and it is passed from *guru* to *shishya* through the spiritual, intellectual and emotional bond between them. The *shishya* leaves behind his social life and devotes his entire attention to the *guru*. The *guru* in turn guides his *shishya* on their path to knowledge and enlightenment. The utter obedience and devotion of the *shishya* is called *bhakti*, a total surrender of ego! For a *shishya* it is his most important duty to spread the values and work of *guru* to the maximum benefit of humanity. Most importantly a *shishya* is a reflection of the *guru*, he/she exudes the glow and radiance of the *guru* to the wider community and the perpetual learning shapes his/her activity!



Now in this light I wish to highlight three key dimensions of discipleship for our reflection today.

Firstly, the disciple is primarily defined by his/her relationship to the master. Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” The knowledge and personal understanding of Jesus born out of an intimate relationship is central to the character of a Christian disciple. Without the spiritual, intellectual and emotional bond between Christ and us, we will be straying away. The disciple draws from the depth and fullness of God in Jesus through the Holy Spirit, and becomes the conveyance of the abundant life possible in Christ. The disciple does not merely speak of it but lives

it. The encounter with the master, the *guru*, the Christ becomes the disciple's character. This process entails, in Jesus' words, "if any one want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me". For Kierkegaard, denying oneself and taking up the cross is death of the self, death of self-reliance, self-confidence and self-centeredness, leaving behind everything and following Christ (*For Self Examination/Judge for yourself, 1990*). Christian discipleship is mapping this experience of absolute devotion and surrender to Christ onto our human reality.

Secondly, the disciple becomes the extension of the master to the community. Discipleship is not a fenced off personal devotional path but a practical life that invites others to come and taste Christ in us. Bonhoeffer writes in his *Papers from the prison* that being a disciple is participation in the being of Jesus, the incarnation, cross and resurrection. He says, "our relation to God is not a religious relationship to the most powerful God, this is not authentic transcendence, but our relation to God is a new life in being there for one another, in participation in the being of Christ. The transcendent is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbour who is within reach in any given situation" (*Letters and Papers from Prison, 1981, p138*). We exude the glory and radiance of Christ to the wider community. In the process of surrendering to Christ, we don't lose our identity but transformed, in such a way that Christ becomes present, when we are present. That's the mark of a true disciple and we all have an invitation to be one. More explicitly put by David Watson, "if the church is to become a community of God's people in the way that Christ demonstrated with his own disciples, it means much more than singing the same hymns, praying the same prayers, taking the same sacraments, and joining in the same services. It will involve the full commitment of our lives, and of all that we have, to one another!" (*Discipleship, 1983, p43*)

Thirdly, the disciple lives out in humility his/her faith and commitment in the community by building each other, in spite of their failures. Christian discipleship cannot and shouldn't be entirely defined by the term 'witness'! Discipleship is not just about 'following Jesus' nor particularly about seeking to become 'Christlike', but is also fundamentally about emulating the way of learning of the first disciples, their learning is primarily learning 'on the way', a pilgrimage. The early disciples were not missionaries as we understand it today, but they were actual learners of the way of truth as shown by Jesus. There were lingering imperfections and on-going struggle with sin. The life of discipleship is a life lived in tension; there is always a gap between our actual realization of holiness and the goal of God-like holiness to which we are called. Nevertheless, the early disciples made a sincere effort to embody the communal dimension of discipleship. Because, faithful disciples of Christ will find, according Jon

Sobrino, a Latin-American theologian, “more happiness in giving than in receiving, give of their own lives, and life itself that others may have life; surrender their lives instead of keeping them for themselves...they are bearing witness to the greatest love, they are responding in love for their sisters and brothers, to the God who has loved us first; they are living the gift of God.”(*Jesus in Latin America, 1987, p54*)

Now as the priority family, when we contemplate on discipleship, let us ask ourselves, what does denying ourselves, taking up our crosses and following him means to us as individuals and as a congregation?

How is our personal relationship with Christ? What is the health of our spiritual, emotional and intellectual bond with our master?

Is that relationship defining our identity and character as a church and as individuals?

Does our worship and all other activities help us in nurturing this crucial relationship?

Can we in all sincerity say that people are able to experience our presence as extensions of Christ?

Do we exude the glory and radiance of Christ among the broken communities around us?

Do we have time to build one another up and nurture each other as Christ did?

What kind of church we need to be? ...

Archbishop Tutu reflecting on discipleship and the need for the Church to re-form itself, he says, “The church of God has to be the salt and light of the world. We are the hope of the hopeless, through the power of God. We must transfigure a situation of hate and suspicion, of brokenness and separation, of fear and bitterness. We have no option. God wants us to be the alternative society; where there is harshness and insensitivity, we must be compassionate and caring; where people are statistics, we must show they count as being of immense value to God; where there is grasping and selfishness, we must be a sharing community now”(*Crying in the Wilderness, 1990, p6*).

Dear friends, as we introspect as a parish about our discipleship, let us look to our master and listen to his invitation to follow him, absolutely surrendering our ego, embark on this pilgrimage of learning, so that we may be the living body of Christ in this world, living the gift of God, so that all may have life. Amen.