

## A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

### Being a Disciple

#### 3 before Advent B

#### Mark 1.14-20

The story in today's Gospel reading is traditionally called 'the call of the disciples'. But, of course, it isn't about Jesus' calling *all* his disciples to follow him - we only hear of 4 of them here.

I wonder what the word 'disciple' means to you?... Perhaps it means the Twelve – the ones whom Jesus appointed for a special role and closeness to him, after he'd spent the night praying on a mountain. (St Luke calls these Twelve 'apostles'.) But there were many more disciples of Jesus than just twelve – he picked those twelve out of a much larger pool. Later he was to send out 70, or 72 of them on a special mission around Galilee – so there must have been at least that number of disciples! But probably, many, many more. And beyond the category of disciples, there were the crowds – the huge crowds – that Jesus preached to, and healed, and had compassion for – and many of these believed in him (if only for a while), and were there to celebrate him as the coming king when he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

So, how are we to distinguish 'disciples' from the much larger group of people who crowded around Jesus – disciples whose number included 'the Twelve', but wasn't limited to that figure.

The word 'disciple' is defined by one dictionary as:

*'a person who believes in the ideas and principles of someone famous and tries to live the way that person does or did.'* (Cambridge English Dictionary).

This definition highlights that being a disciple is about being focused on a person – not *just* a set of ideas . It perhaps doesn't bring out entirely the biblical sense of disciple, though, which is about *following and spending time* with that person – learning what they stand for by listening to what they say, and observing and experiencing, what they do, so as to be ready to imitate them and share their message with others.

Jesus' disciples were followers- they literally followed him around a lot of the time – and they were learners. Part of their learning was to be put into practice what they'd seen him do – as when he sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God, as he did, and to heal people and drive out demons, as he did.

But their learning and imitating was to go deeper: *'if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me'*. (Mark 8.34) I don't suppose any of those first disciples that Jesus called on the shore of the Sea of Galilee realized that spending time with him, learning and imitating him, would in the end mean

suffering as his disciples - but in the end, they learnt it. And some of them did, quite literally, die on crosses, too.

What was the point to Jesus of calling disciples? As it says in our Gospel passage, that they should 'fish' for people with him. That they should draw people to Jesus and the kingdom.

After the Resurrection and Ascension, when Jesus had withdrawn from physical sight, the idea of being a *witness* to what had happened became extremely important. When Peter, as leader of the Twelve, and of all the disciples, said that the number of the Twelve, who had their special ministry, needed to be made-up, after the betrayal and death of Judas. And then he said that someone needed to be chosen from among those who '*accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.*' (Acts 1.21,22). In other words, they needed to choose someone from the wider pool of disciples or followers – someone who had seen all that Jesus did in his ministry, and probably experienced meeting him in his Resurrection as well: someone who *was* a witness of Jesus' deeds and words, and someone who could also *be* a witness, in the sense of telling other people about it. And after that, Matthias was chosen – and we know nothing else about him after this – but only this: that he was already a disciple, who became a member of the Twelve.

So, can Jesus have disciples today – since no one alive now has seen him at work, or heard him teach with his own lips. Are the days of discipleship past?

Surely not: The Church has always taught that we are all called to be disciples. In our modern baptism service, we tell the candidate to '*fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ...and remain faithful*' to the end of his or her life.'

In the twenty-first century may not see Jesus with our eyes, nor follow him along a physical road; we may not hear him with our ears, but we are to be alert to his living presence in lives, and to what he is doing in them, and in the church and in the world. WE need to spend time in his company, through prayer. We are to learn by 'listening' spiritually, and by putting what we hear into practice, even though it may feel very risky. So we are to be witnesses through even our own experience, and thus become 'witnesses' in being able to tell others of what we have learnt by being his followers. It's a path on which we shall learn what suffering and self-sacrifice is necessary as we follow him, step by step. But it's a path which will also have joy and excitement in it – the joy of his presence, and the excitement of finding ourselves useful in the kingdom's work, and in discoveries beyond our imaginations.