

Being a disciple in the power of the Holy Spirit

Sue Hope



‘There may be a cross but the song of the Spirit is always the song of joy. We are invited to sing it at all times and in all places,’

writes Sue Hope

Jacob is the youngest son of close friends of mine. Already showing skill at all kinds of woodworking, he has decided to train as a cabinet maker, and he has been fortunate to have been accepted by the French system of *Les Compagnons du Devoir* to train as a master craftsman. It turns out that this isn't just about 'apprenticeship' – it's about a whole-life change. So, Jacob finds himself living in a French village, in community – a community of people who are willing to put everything aside to become masters of their trade. There are 'house parents' – meals are taken together, there is laughter and companionship – it's 'family'. The apprentices, who are following different trades (stone masons, boiler makers, roofers, and even bakers among them) spend their days working on the shop floor in appropriate factories, or workshops, (carefully selected and monitored by their trainers) and their evenings at base, working at their chosen craft. It's a highly disciplined framework: there are two hours in the workshops after supper, classes all day Saturday and one day off a week to do sport, relax and take time just to be. To be accepted as an 'aspirant' they have to produce their first 'piece', and in evaluating this a humble, teachable attitude is considered as important as the standard of craftsmanship shown. They then start a journey around France moving every six months to another *Compagnons* house, to gain new skills and experience. Each move takes them to a different town and a different job, living with a different group of people but all with the same aim. To qualify as a master craftsman they must produce a superb piece of original work at the end of several years of living in this way. The training is done in community, it's disciplined, it takes account of the individual (the community leaders worked hard to encourage Jacob into the local rugby team in the village so he could 'connect' with a bit of his own culture). It's loving and fun but also strongly structured and determined to get the person concerned to the end goal – to turn out a master craftsman. To become a *Compagnon* means a world-class training for a world-class goal.

Jacob's journey is a very good picture of discipleship. To be a disciple is to be a learner. That's what the word *mathetes* means. It means leaning by apprenticeship, but also more than that. It means 'whole life apprenticeship' – not just nine to five. Jacob is discovering that he can't just keep cabinet making in a box (!). If he is going to be a real artisan it has to permeate the whole of his being. His gifting, his chosen trade is about the whole of his life. He's becoming a true journeyman.

Being a disciple of Jesus is very like Jacob's journey. We might set off knowing we have a bit to learn, but then we discover that the learning is going to be whole-life stuff. It's communal, it's individual, it's fun, it's deadly serious. 'Quite concretely, without any casuistry or legalism, unconventionally, with a sure aim, Jesus lays hold on the individual and summons him to obedience to God, who is to embrace his whole life.'¹ It's intentional. The intent is

our sanctification – or as we might say nowadays ‘transformation’. We are being prepared, changed from one degree of glory to another, so that we may share eternity with God. It’s not just individual of course. Our discipleship isn’t a kind of self-help spirituality journey. Its focus is the Kingdom and its intent is the transformation of the whole created order.

The agent of all this, the teacher, the master craftsman, who imparts his gifts and wisdom to us, who shares his knowledge with us that we might become like him is the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit. So the Christian tradition is nothing less than the imparting of lessons learned, patterns discerned - craftsmen and women of the Spirit passing on what the Spirit has taught them for the generations to follow. The lessons are manifold. Here are a few comments about just five of the key lessons of ‘discipleship in the power of the Holy Spirit’.

Leaving

Jesus was different from other rabbis. People didn’t choose to be discipled by him – he chose them. He still does. The result of being chosen is that we have to leave where we are. The fishermen had to leave their nets. Levi left his tax office. The rich young man was invited to leave his riches – but decided he couldn’t. Paul left the comfort zone of ‘confidence in the flesh’ in order to know Christ. It seems that one of the lessons the Holy Spirit teaches us is that we are invited to leave patterns behind – old patterns of thinking and of relating, destructive patterns, patterns which damage us and others. In our context in western culture, and given that none of us is an island, these may very likely include patterns of addictive behaviour.



Paul twice mentions ‘patterns’ in his letters – he talks of not living according to the pattern of the world (Romans 12) and of ‘living according to the pattern we gave you’ (Philippians 3). We have to leave the habits of our known worlds and to follow Jesus into a new way of living. There’s a lot of *unlearning* to do in the school of the Spirit.

Following



‘The Spirit does not dwell in the mind, but in the life. Not in what we know, but in what we are, does the Spirit begin his work.’ⁱⁱ The disciple doesn’t just have to leave the past behind, there is a new future to be embraced. ‘Follow me’. ‘Jesus expects no more and no less than a fundamental, total orientation of man’s life toward God: an undivided heart, in the last resort serving not two masters but only one.’ⁱⁱⁱ For too long western Christianity has been a religion of the mind – a mental assent to faith in God and in Jesus Christ. But the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ does not allow us refuge in a mental construct. We are summoned out of ourselves to follow the Spirit of Jesus. This following involves ‘physicality’ not just mentality. It involves our bodies as well as our minds. It involves our time and energy. ‘Following’ also means accepting that the landscape will change from time to time. It implies journeying not staying still. Of course, there are times of stillness but increasingly they are within us, holding us still even as we travel.

Dependence

The only way to learn is to lean. We have to be close to hear the heartbeat of God. We become aware that we can do nothing without him – that without him we are fruitless (John 14). And so one of the actions of the Spirit will be to lead us into the wilderness place just as Jesus of Nazareth was led there. In that place of loneliness we can learn a great deal about ourselves, taught by the Spirit himself. Stripped of our illusions and fantasies, we begin to live in his reality and in his strength. Learning to lean is one of the great lessons of the school of the Spirit. Learning that we are empty, learning that we have nothing, learning how to lean on the Beloved is the fruit of the desert life. And like Jesus, in the Spirit's good time, we will emerge from the wilderness 'in the power of the Holy Spirit.' (Luke 4:14). Then heaven may ask of us too with wonder and joy 'who is this coming up out of the wilderness leaning upon her beloved?' (Song of Songs 8:5).



The Spirit and the Cross

Discipleship is cross-shaped. Large crowds are travelling with Jesus when he suddenly turns round to them and warns them that just travelling with him isn't enough (Luke 14:25-33). Being a disciple means that Jesus takes priority over all other loyalties and that a true disciple must carry a cross. We know from the history of the Church that the cost and demand of discipleship can be very high indeed. That's why it can only be done in the power of the in-dwelling Spirit. We cannot be disciples without the Spirit of Christ. Nor can we get away from the pain of the cross. There isn't a 'past cross and a present Spirit-life of power'. The Spirit and the cross belong together. It is not a life of either triumphalism or pessimism. We discover, with Paul, that the path is two-fold 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection - and to share in the fellowship of his sufferings'. (Phil 3:10). There are no easy answers and easy no ways out of the painful places. There is instead the power of Christ to sustain us in the demands of discipleship. He promises us both a crown and a cross – and the cross precedes the crown.

The joy-filled life

There may be a cross but the song of the Spirit is always the song of joy. We are invited to sing it at all times and in all places. From time to time the great well which is the Spirit's life in us wells up in a spontaneous burst of joy. At other times, we find that living the joy-filled life is an act of the will and of discipline. In both modes, it is the Spirit in us who helps us in our weakness to pray and to love and to believe. We are called, summoned, invited to live life in joy and not in despair. And who knows?- perhaps the joy of the Spirit is the secret of true evangelism? Could it be that it really is just that simple?

ⁱ Hans Kung *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1977) page 244

ⁱⁱ Andrew Murray *The Spirit of Christ* (London; Oliphants, 1963) page 71

ⁱⁱⁱ Kung *On being...*p.249

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