

Costly Discipleship

By Susie Leafe

In a few weeks time the General Synod meets again and this time, rather than thinking about bishops, we'll be thinking about discipleship. An altogether more exciting prospect! The Bishop of Sheffield has written a report about Developing Discipleship, which sets us a challenge:

“The lack of a coherent and concisely stated common understanding of discipleship has a number of consequences for the life of parishes, of dioceses and of the Church of England as a whole.

- Our vision for the Church and for discipleship is not as clear as it could be...
- Our understanding of service becomes restricted to the life of the Church...
- Our theological understanding of ministry becomes lopsided...
- Finally, and most seriously, the witness and mission of the whole Church is impoverished as Christians are neither encouraged nor sustained in the living out of their Christian faith in daily life.”

(GS 1977 Developing Discipleship Paragraph 38)

I couldn't agree more.

There is no doubt in my mind that if we had a common understanding of discipleship it would make discussion of other issues so much easier and more effective. So often, it seems, we talk past each other because although we are using the same words we mean such very different things by them.

The report commends “10 Marks of a Diocese Committed to Developing Disciples”, of which one is, “Gatherings for worship celebrate the discipleship of all the baptised”, another, “Diocesan work on vocations is based on the principle that all the baptised are called into God's service” and finally, “Gifts of leadership are recognised and developed among all the baptised”.

All the baptised? Does this include my friend Andy, whose parents arranged for him to be 'christened' 47 years ago, but who has always personally rejected every teaching of the Christian faith? Should we be celebrating his discipleship? Or Siobhan, a cradle Anglican, who was baptised and catechised but then chose, at the age of 21, to become a Muslim and follow Mohammed. Should we still consider her to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Should we be developing her gifts of leadership?

Or, does there need to be evidence that someone has owned their baptism for themselves? Other parts of the report speak of discipleship in terms of ongoing repentance, costly sacrifice, life lived dedicated to God's glory and of lives transformed in holiness. This would suggest that certain beliefs and behaviours are to be expected in those who we would consider to be disciples of Christ.

At General Synod we will be making an important choice. The media may not be that interested in our discussions about what it means to be a disciple, preferring to focus on issues of gender and sexuality, but this will be a key decision and one that I fear we will not resolve, without an outpouring of God's Holy Spirit.

I've recently been reading Metaxas' excellent book, "Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy", so Bonhoeffer has been on my mind. Once I've finished it, I plan to read his book on discipleship, where he wrote,

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Bonhoeffer goes on "Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him."

Please pray that in our discussion of discipleship at General Synod we will reject any hint of cheap grace and instead seek to offer the world the pearl of great price.