



FOLLOW ME

To the members of the Family of St Asaph

A Pastoral Letter for the New Year, January 2021

We're familiar, I suspect, with the story of the twelve disciples, who are an integral part of the story of Jesus in the Gospels. As sure as Snow White belongs with the Seven Dwarfs, so Jesus belongs with the twelve, if that isn't too trivialising a thing to say. What is so fascinating in the Gospels is what a motley band the disciples are. They make a mess of things, they misunderstand, they question, they fail to believe and to follow. Over the course of the ministry of Jesus, however, they are forged into apostles, and Jesus is not afraid at his ascension to put the whole business of the Gospel of Salvation and the Church into their hands.

I was challenged before Christmas when someone said to me that they didn't think that Christians today thought of themselves as disciples, and that people didn't understand what a disciple was. It was a name which belonged in the Bible, but was hardly a contemporary description of faith, they said.

For me, the fundamental question of faith is whether I am a disciple. Faith is not an abstract exercise of the mind, it is how it affects my daily life. A disciple is one who learns: it is clearer in the Welsh, where disciple and pupil are the same word: *disgybl*. To be a Christian is to lay one's life on the line, and to follow Jesus. We see the "crisis" of discipleship when Jesus calls the twelve – peremptorily – from their fishing or their tax collection or their political activism. He just turns up, it appears, and issues the invitation (we might be better saying "command".) And they go with him, they leave their work, they leave their families, they set out on a journey from which, to tell the truth, they never return, and yet they come truly home. The gospels even tell us about one occasion when someone said "no": a rich young aristocrat, who just couldn't tear himself away from the privileges of his wealth (Mark. 10.17-27).

Jesus, I'm afraid, doesn't call us to stay where we are, in the sense of saying our creeds with meaning, but otherwise going about our lives. He calls us to set out on a journey, away from the familiar, to become larger than we are, greater in spirit, holier in life, loving in service. Nor does he make it easy, "If anyone does want to come after me," he says in Luke 9.23, "they must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and so follow me."

Are we frightened by this? Was it enough to be baptised or confirmed in the past, so that we need not heed the call that comes today or tomorrow, to go somewhere we don't expect and to learn something new about the real meaning of life? This is what it is to be a Christian: to learn what God has in store for us and to follow it, to be a disciple. The disciples didn't find following Jesus easy, and indeed, the Gospel according to John tells us that on one occasion Jesus' teaching was so demanding that a lot of people gave up, and left. (John chapter 6, particularly v.66 ff) Jesus has to turn to the twelve, and say: "Are you lot off as well?" It is good old Simon Peter who replies on this occasion: "Where else could we go?", he says, "You are the one who has the words which give eternal life."

And that's the promise – to follow Jesus, to go on the unexpected journey, is to discover the riches of a life beyond compare, beyond blessing. "He who would true valour see, let him come hither," wrote John Bunyan in the seventeenth century. "One here will constant be, come wind, come weather. There's no discouragement shall make him once relent his first avowed intent: to be a pilgrim." Pilgrim follower, disciple. Are you a disciple? I can think of no better vocation, no more exciting journey in 2021 than to get up, shake off the lethargy or the disgruntlement, and to go through the door of life, and look to Jesus, who stretches his hand towards us, and for us to say to him: "Here I am, and where you lead, I will follow."