

# The Greatest Need for the Church Today

David Bracewell, Lee Abbey, 16 September 2016

**Lee Abbey**<sup>1</sup> is a conference, retreat and holiday centre in North Devon based around a country house, and staffed by a community of about 90 people of various ages and backgrounds; men and women from all around the world, and at different stages of life; though it is striking just how many vibrant young Christians live and work a vocation there for a period of time.

**David Bracewell**<sup>2</sup> is retired from stipendiary Anglican ministry, and now shares his experience and knowledge as a speaker at churches as a guest, at conferences, and as a mentor to other church leaders. He organises this through *Zoë Ministry*<sup>3</sup>. The course he gave at *Lee Abbey* was titled ***The Greatest Need of the Church Today***. The teaching was delivered over a series of sessions over three days, and therefore this précis represents a summary of all that.

Introductory bibliography:

Rowan Williams; 2016; *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian life*; SPCK Publishing.  
Alison Morgan; 2015; *Following Jesus: The Plural of Disciple is Church*; ReSource.  
N T Wright; 1994; *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship*; SPCK Publishing.

Also;

Chick Yuill; 2011; *Moving in the Right Circles: Embrace the Discipleship Adventure Paperback*; IVP.  
Eugene Peterson; 2000; *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*; IVP.  
David Watson; 1984; *Discipleship*; Hodder and Stoughton.  
Katharine Tait; 1975; *My Father, Bertrand Russell*.  
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich; 1937/1995; *The Cost Of Discipleship*; Touchstone Press, Simon and Schuster.  
G P Mellick Belshaw; 1965/1990; *Lent with Evelyn Underhill*; Morehouse publishing.  
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Augustine of Hippo; *Confessions*.  
Bill Jackson; 1999; *The Quest for the Radical Middle*; Vineyard Publishing.  
Alexander Venter; 2000; *Doing Church: Building From the Bottom Up*; Vineyard Publishing.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://leeabbey.org.uk/devon/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.zoeministry.co.uk/services.html>

**David Bracewell** has spent 40 years working in and leading churches in Kent, Lancashire, Yorkshire, and most recently in Surrey where the church in Guildford grew to a membership of 1000+. During his 25 years in Guildford he helped prepare 30 candidates from the church for ordination. For two years he taught ordinands at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. Now in retirement he remains passionate about encouraging church leaders at all stages of their ministry.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.zoeministry.co.uk/>

## Session 1

David took as his starting point thus;

*He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob,  
nor has he seen trouble in Israel.  
The LORD their God is with them,  
and the shout of a king is among them.*<sup>4</sup>

This is part of the passage recounting how Balak the son of Zippor, who was king of Moab, was afraid of the Israelites and hired Balaam son of Beor to curse them<sup>5</sup>. The crucial idea is that *The LORD their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them*. This is what David described as the most important thing, *the greatest need for the church today*. This might be expounded as definitive; that the church by definition has God's presence; if it does not have God's presence, it is not church, and if it does, it is. But this needs to be realized; it needs to be perceived and experienced and known and understood; and this perceiving, experiencing, knowing and understanding needs to be incarnated in its members; and the process of growing into this is discipleship. Part of this verse is about the presence of God with them, *The LORD their God is with them*, and part is about the meaning that Immanent Presence; *the shout of the King*. This latter describes the kingly authority of God, made manifest in commands. Part of that is in protecting his people, as in the story of Balaam in which he cannot curse Israel, because God's shout blesses them; and part of it is providing for his people, and empowering them in his will, guiding them, and equipping them in the tasks which he sets before them. This began the examination of discipleship.

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<sup>4</sup> Numbers 23:21 ESV

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 23:17-24 ESV *And he came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab with him. And Balak said to him, "What has the LORD spoken?" And Balaam took up his discourse and said, "Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor:*

*God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.*

*Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?*

*Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.*

*He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel.*

*The LORD their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them.*

*God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox.*

*For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel;*

*now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, 'What has God wrought!'*

*Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up, and as a lion it lifts itself;*

*it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain."*

## Session 2

To be a Christian is to be a disciple. He extrapolates; a Christian is a follower of Christ, thus a disciple, and discipleship happens in the head, in understanding; in the heart, in fellowship; and in life, in daily following.

*Christians in the West', claims David Watson, 'have largely neglected what it means to be a disciple of Christ. The vast majority of western Christians are church-members, pew-fillers, hymn-singers, sermon-tasters, Bible-readers, even born-again believers or Spirit-filled charismatics, but not true disciples of Jesus.'*<sup>6</sup>

What this means can be experienced personally and corporately, as above; the presence of God, which is necessarily the presence of Jesus, which is cultivated and nurtured, necessarily by discipleship.

He then went on to Mark 16:1-8

*When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. **But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.**" And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

David's point here is that once Jesus was seen to be risen, once discovered, he asked the disciples to go back to the beginning, to where they first met him and grew to know him. To go on from there, first they need to go back to where they came from.

The thrust of this is that to be a Christian, is to live as a Christian, and to live as a Christian is to live as a disciple. That, he said, is not optional. A Christian is a disciple of Jesus, and a disciple of Jesus is a Christian; one can be good disciple or a bad disciple, but one cannot be a Christian and not at all a disciple. A disciple is learner, an apprentice, and thus a Christian is one who for their whole life learns, imitates and practices, how to do what Jesus did. So, he said, to move on we need to be able to go back, to the beginning, to when we first started to follow Jesus, to be a learner; a disciple. He wants us to recall where it all started, and what first drew us to faith in Jesus; to recall how it happened, either slowly or quickly, suddenly or gradually, stealthily or obviously. To remember what happened in our real life. He asked us; where did it begin for us? How did we first meet Jesus? How did we come to believe? For me, Jeremy, it was a damp November morning in a driveway in Camberwell, near my art school where a fellow student called Gill prayed for me. As she prayed, a thought struck me; *What if this is true after all?* I then fell in love with the Truth.

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<sup>6</sup> Watson, David; 1984; *Discipleship*.

John 14:6 ESV *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

1 John 5:6 ESV *And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.*

For those disciples it was this, Mark 1:16-20:

*Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.*

He then had a challenge for us to look at, an idea that we needed to accept, John 15:16: *You did not choose me, but I chose you.* He quoted Blaise Pascal; *tu ne me chercherais pas, si tu ne m'avais trouvé* or *you would not be searching for me if you had not found me*<sup>7</sup>. It is an encouragement that in seeking God, we prove that he seeks us, and that he has found us. That does not mean that we cease to search, but that our search is not in vain. He went on to an idea from Rob Bell, described in his film *Nooma No. 8: Dusty*<sup>8</sup>, and in his book, *Velvet Elvis*<sup>9</sup>. Rob Bell describes how rabbis might choose disciples, the point being that the rabbi sees in each disciple the capacity, the potential, to do what they do. They only chose the best students, the best possible pupils, and a blessing given to those students was this; *May you be covered with dust of your rabbi!* This means *May you follow your master so closely that you are covered by the dust from his feet;* or *May you be so privileged that are really close to him* or *May you be so quick to learn and able that you really can do it.* As when Jesus then calls Peter out of the boat during the storm:

*And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"*<sup>10</sup>

Peter was chosen because Jesus saw in him that he could do what Jesus did, in this case walk on the water; why then did Peter doubt? Jesus has called not only the best or most able or gifted, but he has called us to be like him. Jesus believes in us, that we can do like him. He does not ask us of us the impossible, but he does know, that in him, we are capable of the remarkable. This then is the call of discipleship; to do what he did, as he asks us, as he shows us. If we do this, we can do, remarkably. This will require attentiveness to Jesus, who leads us, and expectation that he will lead us and help us, as we

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.penseesdepascal.fr/Hors/Hors16-moderne.php>

The *Pensées* (literally "thoughts") is a collection of fragments on theology and philosophy written by 17th-century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal.

Pascal, Blaise; 1995; *Pensees*; Penguin Classics.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3yTy5w01QU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DswAPdgFRMs>

<sup>9</sup> Bell, Rob; 2006; *Velvet Elvis: Repainting The Christian Faith*; Zondervan.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 14:28-31 ESV

apprentices are being trained by him in his ways. As C S Lewis said in *The Silver Chair*<sup>11</sup>, *You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you," said the Lion*, And then again, in *The Last Battle*<sup>12</sup>:

*Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek . . . .*

*And since then, O Kings and Ladies, I have been wandering to find him and my happiness is so great that it even weakens me like a wound. And this is the marvel of marvels, that he called me Beloved, me who am but as a dog.*

Which brings us smoothly onto the next point; we are beloved. We are the dearly beloved of the *Song Of Songs*; the Bride of the Bridegroom. We have been called because we are loved;

*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us*<sup>13</sup>

*We love because he first loved us.*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> C S Lewis; 1953; *The Silver Chair*.

<sup>12</sup> C S Lewis; 1956; *The Last Battle*.

<sup>13</sup> 1 John 4:10 ESV

<sup>14</sup> 1 John 4:19 ESV

### Session 3

David recapped with this summary of Jesus from Matthew, as he chose, called, and then sent out his disciples:

Matthew 9:9 ESV *As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.*

Matthew 9:13 ESV *Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Matthew 9:37-38 ESV *Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest."*

Matthew 10:1 ESV *And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.*

Matthew 10:5-7 ESV *These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.'*

In these passages, Jesus first sees and then chooses people. He called them to follow him, so that they can watch him and learn from him, both from watching and being instructed; and then they are sent out to do the work which he has been doing. He suggests to the disciples that they should pray for extra helpers. As Chick Yuill says, *We learn on the job, to do the things that he does*<sup>15</sup>.

David then went on to quote two passages. The first was Hebrews 12:1-3:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*

This is to make the point that discipleship represents effort, and that it is a sustained long term effort, not a burst of energy; a marathon, not a sprint. It also suggests the idea of people around us, unseen to us, but cheering us on. The idea of a witness works two ways. One is that they watch us and cheer us on, like spectators at a race, or like marathon runners who linger at the finish line to cheer on and welcome whose coming after them. Another is that they are examples to us of faithfulness and perseverance and honour and just rewards. Their example is for imitation, and their reward is to encourage us that we too have a reward waiting. We do this together, not alone; we seek out companions on the road, and find those who we love and find inspiring. There is a discipline here, *of fixing our eyes, looking away from all else, to Jesus*. This is a daily thing; a daily relationship, a daily attention; being present to him each day, following closely, so as to be covered in the dust from his feet.

The second was 2 Kings 5:17-19:

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<sup>15</sup> Chick Yuill; 2011; *Moving in the Right Circles: Embrace the Discipleship Adventure Paperback*; Inter-Varsity Press.

*Then Naaman said, "If not, please let there be given to your servant two mule loads of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the LORD. In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter." He said to him, "Go in peace."*

This makes the point that the Lord meets us where we are, and we have to deal honestly with the pressures of where we are and who we live with. Elisha did not feel the need to point out that God is God of the whole earth, and thus equally present everywhere, and not at all dependent upon any particular type of soil. Naaman's faith was brand new and not strong, and he needed to discover for himself the depths of that, but Elisha, and the LORD, were not going to heap everything on to him at once. The LORD is gracious. This is not to deny the truth or reality or necessity of doctrine, but that the disciple grows into the fullness of the truth of these things, as part of the journey of growth and learning. Likewise the conscience of Naaman is stirred by the knowledge that he will end up bowing in the pagan temple as his master does so. Naaman is right to be concerned. This is not to allow that somehow Rimmon is real, or that it is proper to bow to images, but it is to allow that Naaman is spared from this crisis of conscience by the LORD's grace. He is allowed to live in the growing knowledge of God. For him, the temple of Rimmon is part of the world he lives in. We have to be disciples in the world in which we live. Our discipleship grows, negotiated, navigated, within the world around it.

We need to understand that world around us. It is materialistic; we need to navigate it. A secular novelist saw that shopping defeats faith, not argument or philosophy. We need to be real about the idols around us, aware of them, and how they shape us and influence us. We need to gradually become transfigured away from them into Christ's likeness.

Romans 12:2 ESV *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

This was followed by challenge; how do we live in our knowledge? Are we hard on ourselves for not being rigorous enough in lifestyle and understanding? Or are we indulgent on ourselves, not considering important the implications of the faith or understanding we do have? Where on a spectrum might we find ourselves?

There is another thing we might think about; how do we know God? How do we experience that knowledge? We might ask ourselves how we might plan to spend time with God in order to know him better? About how we might find time and space to do this? About how we might simplify or quieten our lives in order to hear God more? Rowan Williams said; *Self-awareness and stillness. To hear what God is saying we need a degree of stillness – stillness of body as well as of mind or heart. 'Be still and know', says the psalm (Psalm 46:10)*<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://goo.gl/UWMG4t>

Williams, Rowan; 2016; *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian life*; SPCK.

## Session 4

The greatest need of the church therefore is to hold and testify to the Presence among us. This is enabled by discipleship. This is not a small option but a life. This will mean Christ uplifted and glorified in such a way that people can respond. Discipleship is a response to a calling; a change in direction; an apprenticeship.

But there is another side to this. We are also called to suffer alongside Christ. Jesus says, *Come and die*<sup>17</sup>. If we are faithful followers of Christ, we must expect some wounds, because our Lord was wounded<sup>18</sup>.

The next passage is this, Luke 9:18-27:

*Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen." Then he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Christ of God." And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God."*

There is the challenge of *Crucifixion* here; the denying of self, to take up the cross, and follow Jesus, thereby renouncing security, greed and fear. Once chosen and called, and once a disciple has responded, they to face the fact that they might well suffer for their faith. The effort is not just the effort of a race, but of maybe enduring opposition and hardship. Once Peter saw the Christ, he was challenged to take up his cross; to dethrone his self-centeredness, and enthrone Christ as King. This begins an ongoing process of rooting out self-interest and self-preservation. This apprenticeship is a way of suffering, enthroning Christ, rooting out self, so as to allow all life to be subordinated to the Cross. Sometimes teaching of comfort and prosperity and easy grace with easy living creeps in to the church, but following Christ

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<sup>17</sup> Galatians 2:20 *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Galatians 5:24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

Mark 8:35 *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*

John 12:24 *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

John 12:25 *Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*

Colossians 3:3 *For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*

2 Corinthians 5:17 *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

Luke 17:33 *Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.*

Luke 14:33 *So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.*

<sup>18</sup> John 15:18-20 ESV *"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.*

involves a call to suffer, perhaps day by day, covered in dust. This maybe physical suffering; it can also be the re-negotiating of all life's values and goals, with the pangs of loss as things are discarded or lost.

This is followed by the challenge of how this lives in us, of *Incarnation*; how we feel and experience this, and how we understand it, day to day. For this we need space; *stillness*. But this is followed, if healthy, by *growth* and *joy*. Incarnation literally means in-the-flesh; how do these things happen in the flesh of our lives?

Rowan Williams sums it up:

*As we follow, we are learning to understand ourselves better; to become more self-aware. To step back from circumstances and ask; what am I doing here? What am I thinking here? What am I feeling here? What is the reality of this? We examine our lives in the light of knowing Jesus.*

As we follow, we need to find a way of stillness that is not stagnation. We need to crucify frenetic busyness, with the urge to achieve, to justify every moment, with ensuing desperation, and find how to slow some things down; how to simplify; to learn to appreciate some little, humble things, and small pleasures. Evelyn Underhill said, *On every level of life, from housework to heights of prayer, in all judgment and efforts to get things done, hurry and impatience are sure marks of the amateur.*

As we follow, we seek to grow, not just in activity, but in knowledge, in grace, in maturity; to seek for wisdom, fruitfulness, and to utilise the needs of grace; Scripture, prayer, sacraments, fellowship, and dialogue, with God and with each other.

As we follow, we seek and should experience, *Joy*. Many of Jesus' followers speak of their joy, irrespective of their circumstances, sometimes even in the most awful and dreadful experiences. Again, Evelyn Underhill, *This is the secret of joy. We shall no longer strive for our own way; but commit ourselves, easily and simply, to God's way, acquiesce in his will and in so doing find our peace.* Joy can be nurtured by worship, and worship can always be done, even in the night shift, even in the dark. Praise goes on in the night of adversity and difficulty, and even in suffering, and with it comes consequential joy. Evelyn Underhill speaks of *the fruit of the spirit, love joy, peace, that threefold formula for blessedness*<sup>19</sup>.

Galatians 5:22-24 ESV *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

So the joy, which is such a blessing and comfort and treasure for the Lord's people, is actually part of the way of the way of Cross, not in spite of it; it is because of it. It will necessarily follow the way discipleship; it will be in the inevitable experience of the faithful disciple.

We need to ask ourselves the question: *For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?* If in the end we lose everything, what do we gain? What use are power and wealth and acclaim, and even pleasure, comfort and safety, if we then die? What are we working for? What can we relinquish? What are we aware of being unable or unwilling to relinquish? What are we holding on to above and beyond all other things?

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<sup>19</sup> G P Mellick Belshaw; 1965/1990; *Lent with Evelyn Underhill*; Morehouse publishing. P.83.

Romans 12:1 ESV

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

We are challenged by the need to be aware of who we are and what we are doing. When something happens, we need to be able to think about how we react; our anger, happiness, fear, relief, comfort, insecurity, and ask ourselves, *Why do I respond like that? What does this mean to me?* We need to be aware about how much we are shaped by other people; by what they expect us to do, or not do; like, or not like. We need to be aware about how we are influenced and encouraged or guided; about the origin of our ideas and values. As disciples, our values, our ideas, our goals and priorities are not to be shaped by the world around us, but by Jesus; by his Word and by his Spirit.

Romans 12:2 ESV

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said *When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die*<sup>20</sup>. He goes on to describe how leaving the fishing nets was for the disciples like a death, a taking up of the cross. It is the leaving of the old life, and the taking up of the new life.

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<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich; 1995; *The Cost Of Discipleship*; Touchstone Press, Simon and Schuster. p.89. (translation, SCM 1955).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfVg1XdJGR4> Living Sacrifices: Simon Guillebaud

## Session 5

So to recap; God is incarnated in us in rigorous discipleship, which in turn is a call to follow, to be apprenticed, to dethrone the self. For Alison Morgan, discipleship is apprenticeship in community. We are initially baptised into the Body of Christ; the church, which is all his people who are called by his name. Too often church becomes the **ABC** of PCC meetings; **A**ttendance, **B**uildings, **C**ash. But at least equally, and preferably more so, it should be **D** and **E** as well; **D**iscipleship and **E**vangelism. If we put the letters the other way round; firstly **D**iscipleship, then **E**vangelism, then the rest will follow. If we strive to make disciples we will get church. If we strive to make church, we may well not get disciples. Real church might be described as a disciple making community, shaped for its mission.

Acts 2:42-47 ESV

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

The church is apprenticeship undertaken in community. We are all in this together.

There are three main angles on our part of the church community, those of big community and small community.

One is the larger aspects of the church community, the most obviously public being in which we worship together. But less obviously the church is also called to practice hospitality and reconciliation. These can be outward things towards visitors and strangers, but also inward things towards each other. The big community can be a place of generous hospitality. The welcome is in the extension of real hospitality, which is why *Alpha* works so well; a good meal, freely given, is real hospitality, and is meaningful, and easily understood. Hospitality should be whole heartedly kind and generous; it should feel good. Hospitality which is grudging or parsimonious or stingy in any way is not hospitable. This is also a place of reconciliation; a forum in which people work out, and through, their differences. We need to work out our differences from God i.e. our sin, in repentance and forgiveness, our justification, and our re-creation into Christ i.e. our sanctification. Having worked out our differences with God, we can then also begin to work out our differences from each other; we can forgive each other, and forbear each other. This also contains the priestly role of building bridges; the church as whole having a priestly role towards the world, and individuals within it having that role towards other individuals. The church also carries with it the prophetic role of speaking to the world the Word of God, and of understanding and interpreting the world in the light of the Spirit and the Word.

These other aspects of community can also be practiced in smaller settings, for example in home groups or fellowship groups. These groups can be very useful as places in which to foster relationships, and thus extend hospitality and reconciliation on a more personal level; but also places in which to train, and to learn those things which cannot be taught or done in public Sunday services. These smaller groups are

essential in training and equipping members so that those things can be grown and replicated on the larger scale of the wider church.

We can always get things wrong, but when we get them right, it can be the greatest thing ever.

The maxim to remember is that if we focus on making disciples, then church will follow; but if focus on making churches, we rarely get disciples.

At heart, we are called, like Naaman, to be where we are. Like the demonised man from Gadara, we are often sent home;

Mark 5:18-20 ESV

*As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. And he did not permit him but said to him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marvelled.*

We are called to be disciples where we are. In our own places; to remain where we are, to be the leaven in the lump; the yeast in the dough.

Remaining though presents us with a risk; that of simply taking things easy, and gratifying our self and our flesh. One way of mitigating this risk is to be real with each other, in having fellowship with our masks off. This needs to happen in smaller communities; in home groups, prayer groups, study groups or whatever. We need to find those places where we can be attentive to the Living God.

Overall, our communities need to be places of worship. Music can definitely aid this, but in the end it is not about the specifics of liturgy or music; it is about the presence of God amongst his people. Worship flows out from these ministries of hospitality and reconciliation. Worship is best conducted in the atmosphere of expectation of God's presence, and then the hungry and fearful can come to meet God, and Live.

This leaves with a question about our church communities; how easy is it for a new person to firstly really *feel* and consider *themselves* welcome? And then to become *integrated* into them, as a new part of them?

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24 ESV

*We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

Rowan Williams; *Church is what happens when people encounter the risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other.*

*Don't patrol the boundaries; warm the core.* If Elisha had insisted on the boundaries, Naaman would not have understood, or been able to respond. Elisha took the warmth at the core of Naaman's faith and nurtured it. The rest could follow in time. The new members need to be warmed in the heart of their faith, before they can journey on. The warmth at the core of our whole churches needs to be warmed, so that it can warm the edges, and spread out.

John Wimber put it slightly similarly but differently. He utilized the *centred set* understanding of membership in his Vineyard Churches. The *centred set* understanding of membership allows for a clear vision of the focal point, the ability to move toward that point, without being tied down to smaller diversions.

The centred set does not limit membership to pre-conceived boundaries. Instead a centred set is conditioned on a centred point. Membership is contingent on those who are moving toward that point. Elements moving toward a particular point are part of the set, but elements moving away from that point are not. As a centred-set, Christian membership would be dependent on moving toward the central point of Jesus. Christians are then defined by their focus and movement toward Christ rather than a limited set of shared beliefs and values.

This describes the Christian community, the church, then as a group of people moving together towards Jesus, not as a group sharing a common badge or culture. Another way of reading this would be to say that as disciples move towards Jesus, they form the church that lives and acts.

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He made the comparison with the legend of Robin Hood. Robin Hood remained faithful to the true king, Richard the Lion Heart, being his good subject, honouring him. He lived in hope, waiting for the return of the true king, and spoke of it, spreading the rumour of his return to encourage other supporters, and remind those opposed that one day there would be a reckoning. Our task as Christians is to await the coming King, to honour him, and to spread the rumour of his coming, so that others can wait with us.

And we need to be composed, consistent, compassionate, creative.

One way in which the church can look out for its missional focus can be to look for the pain in its wider community. Jesus saw the pain of the people, and ministered to that pain. That is quite possibly where God would work now as well; in the pain of those living around us. That ministry was given strictly on his terms, and he confused, angered and bewildered people because he did minister in the way they expected; he did not join the rebellion against Caesar, but offered a new Kingdom. He did not reform the priesthood, but became our great High Priest. He did not make Gentiles into Jews, but grafted them into Israel. He did not review or define the traditions of the Pharisees, but baptised with the Spirit and returned to the Law and Writings and Prophets. He did not gratify the flesh, but teaches how to deny the flesh. Now he offers a new identity and family and nation to people looking for a new identity or family or nation; our new identity as children of God, brothers and sister of each other and Jesus, and as a Holy

Nation, a Royal Priesthood. We need to understand the world so as to understand its pain, and then apply the right medicine.

Our post modern world is a number of things:

It is *fearful*. The 2008 financial crisis; immigration; Brexit; Islamisation; all these stimulate unanswerable fears in people. Fearful people look about in search of hope, which for a materialist is hard to find.

It is *frivolous*. Part of the frivolity about us is a reaction to this fear. Pleasure as escapism from the creeping suspicion that the party will one day end; *eat, drink and make merry, for tomorrow we die*. Celebrity culture, TV shows, like obsessions with *Bake Off* or *The Archers*. This frivolity can easily spill into anger though, as all things are trivialised, and anything can then appear threatening.

It is *frenzied*. In the insatiable quest for pleasure or escapism, the only urgency is to do as much as possible, in place of as well as possible. Alison Morgan describes this as *manic hedonism*.

It is *fragile*. Everything is endlessly moving, so nothing can be given commitment. People endlessly keep their options open, only choosing to have children at the very last moment of biological possibility, or else finding it too late. Things then appear unstable, ever shifting, impermanent; nothing is truly forever, not work, not marriage, not family; nothing. All is mutable and undependable.

It is *fretful*. Amongst all this, the soul gradually realises the need for something else, for something better. *For You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You*<sup>21</sup>. Some at least, and possibly, many, are looking for a better, less superficial way of life.

A better less superficial way of life though, is almost inevitably at odds with all the other things above, hence therefore a typically post modern dilemma; life feels dissatisfying and pointless, but as soon as purpose and satisfaction are sought, they require meaning and commitment. It is pointless in this environment to present forgiveness, when nothing is admitted wrong; and pointless to present doctrine, when nothing is admitted as true. We cannot convince by ideology. We can however offer hospitality, reconciliation, and worship, if these are real.

Matthew 28:16-20 ESV The Great Commission

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

Notice, that Jesus didn't wait till they were all perfect; he just sent them off as they were, doubts and all.

We are called: to change direction; to be apprentices; to be in company with others; for the sake of the world. *The task of the church is to rob the world of its children*. We too are witnesses of these things. We can do this, greatly aided by being composed and doing what we can. We don't need to worry about what

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<sup>21</sup> Augustine of Hippo; *Confessions*; Book 1, Section 1.

we cannot do, but focus upon what we can. Within that, we can be relaxed and poised, and do what is natural to us as real people.

The daughter of Bertrand Russell said that her father's life was a search for God, but that his search was frustrated by truth being hidden some bad Christians<sup>22</sup>. Robert Louis Stevenson always remembered the sight of lamplighters in the evening, lighting gas lamps. We are the Lord's witnesses, lighting lamps in the dark of the world. Let's not hide the truth, but instead light lamps.

What new initiatives could our churches begin? How could we find and minister to the pain of our communities? How can we be creative in ministry to our communities? How can we be a blessing to our communities? But one thing is essential; in mission, we must be expectant that the Lord is amongst us, and that he will draw people to himself, and that people will come to Christ.

*Where there is no love, put love, and you will find love -- St. John of the Cross, Letter To The Prioress Of Segovia, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1591.*

Mission is putting love where love is not.

The church is a community offering *living proof of a loving God to a watching world*<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Katharine Tait; 1975; *My Father, Bertrand Russell*.

<sup>23</sup> John Ortberg; Senior Pastor, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church.