

Four steps to discipleship

Whenever we are about to step into the unknown, it seems that fear assails us from all sides. Fear of what comes next, fear of not being able to rise up to the task that lies ahead. Many of us are about to move on – James is searching for another parish. I’m going to France sometime in August, but I have no clue what happens after then. Will I be selected to train as a vicar? How will that affect my life, my faith, my habits, my friends, my finances... For others, it might be – will I pass these exams? What’s going to happen to my friend, who is ill and in hospital? How are we going to cope when James leaves? Or when the new musical director starts his job?

And sometimes, this fear locks us into inaction. It locks us into trying to keep on doing what we were doing for as long as possible, to shut the fear outside. Haven’t we all done that? Had a moment of panic and decided to just ignore it?

This is where the disciples are at the start of the Gospel passage. There’s just been a massive change in their lives – their teacher and leader just was killed. They still meet, of course – but we find they meet behind locked doors, we hear for fear of the Jews.

So how do they change from being like us, fear-stricken disciples, to being the bold apostles we see in Acts? The bold apostles who defy the authority of the Sanhedrin by saying “We must obey God rather than any human authority”, even when doing just that got them into jail!

So today I’d like to look at what happens in that house, where Jesus appears behind closed doors and lets the fear-stricken disciples out. What happens to get me out of my worldly worries about where I will end up next year, and... into next year?

In that house, four things happen. Four essential steps, which we also need to follow if we want to be effective disciples.

Step one: accept the risen Christ who is given to us.

Last week, we all joyously shouted “He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!” We know Christ is risen – don’t we? There still *is* someone to follow.

Christ shows up behind locked doors. And we might go back and lock doors again, be afraid again; and still He will show up. He is in our midst. Our part is to recognise and accept Him. True, we don't usually get to see His hands and His side. But He is around us, everyday – if we just pause and take the time to find Him. Pray. Remember how He has helped you in the past. Draw near for communion. Meet friends and see Him in them. It's not a matter of looking far, or looking in specific places like this church – although I hope that we help! It's a matter of just opening our eyes to Him when we are in the midst of our worries, or of whatever is keeping us behind locked doors.

That's an essential step. Without it, we may be disciples – but we won't be Christ's disciples. And if we follow something that is finite, we won't be able to persevere. In all that we do, in our fear and in our overcoming this fear; in our staying in and in our going out, we must follow Christ – as someone who shows us the way out, and someone to model.

That's all in the hymn we just sang, we said: "I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. (...) All other ground is sinking sand". All other ground is sinking sand indeed.

Step two: Receive his peace.

As soon as He comes in, Jesus says to the disciples: "Peace be with you." He wants to extend His peace even before He is recognised, and that open hand IS there at all times. And as soon as the disciples recognise Him, He repeats: "PEACE BE WITH YOU".

This should be a natural consequence of step one – of seeking Jesus as the source of our discipleship – that we should find peace. Because, knowing that God is on our side, the very God who raised Jesus from the dead, has exalted Jesus, is a pretty awesome safety net!

It doesn't always seem as straightforward. When I was thinking about what I should do next year – between starting training for ministry or teaching maths, I considered doing them both side-by-side. It never felt right. Oh, I was elated that there was a solution. In a way, I had glimpsed a way out, and I ran straight for it, but wasn't quite feeling at peace about it. I paused. Another solution appeared, and in that one I felt peace.

See, in giving us His peace, Jesus unlocks the door. If we don't receive it and still run out towards the door, we might run into a wall!. So pause and seek God's peace **first**.

And then, like Peter, you won't be troubled or anxious when the Sanhedrin comes and gets you again. Rather, your own fears will shrink before you, in the same way as the high priest is afraid.

Step three: Receive (and embrace!) his command.

What is the nature of this command? Jesus tells the disciples: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." No specifics about the place, or the nature of the mission. But knowing the ministry of Jesus, sent from the Father, we do know what this command entails: it entails knowledge. It entails submission, even when your will is different, as we saw a few weeks back when Jesus did not go and heal Lazarus straightaway. It comes back to the question of who we're disciples of – and if it's Jesus we are following, we must be imitators of Christ!

And finally, step four: rely on the Holy Spirit to sustain and guide us in our actions

Even after we've been sent out, we are not alone! The disciples receive the Holy Spirit – and that seems to go hand in hand with their mission; just as it goes hand in hand with Peter's.

[Consequences]

So there you have them – four essential steps to true discipleship. ground your action in Christ, receive his peace, embrace his command, and receive his holy spirit. And I truly believe that they are all equally important. Step four can only come after step three can only come after step two can only come after step one. Some of us are still stuck, bound indoors by our fears, our worries and our concerns; and keep on simply receiving Christ and His peace, but do not go out. Some of us have a tendency to just focus on step three: the doing part.

Just last Sunday, a friend told me he believed he no longer was a Christian. Basically, after reconsidering his life, he found he could not say that he was, to use his words, "in a relationship with Jesus". And reassessing his actions to date, he told me he felt hypocritical for his Christian action. He was "doing" Christian things, not "being" Christian.

That's what we all risk if we don't build our works on the good foundation of Jesus. If we only do things because "that's what Christians do". Even going back to the Bible to check our actions against it is not sufficient. It's a good thing to do, but it's not sufficient: if the only thing that drives us to preach the Gospel is the Great Commission, then we are not leaning on Christ. We are not being sent "as the Father has sent Jesus", in love of others; and we are bound to run out of steam eventually, like my friend.

So I'd like us to pause a little while, and consider why we are doing what we do, and how grounded in Christ our walk is. *[30 SECS OF SILENCE]*

Following the blueprint to discipleship does not necessarily mean an easy ride, but it is a race of perseverance, where boldness shines through, and - perhaps most importantly - where peace reigns throughout. Before the Gospel passage, the disciples are behind locked doors. In Acts, even a prison does not hold the disciples. In discipleship, the message is clear: there are no worldly walls and locks.

At the end of the service, you will be equally freed from the confines of this building, and let out into the world. David will tell you to "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord". Indeed, you are to *go* beyond this place, still Christians even

after you've walked past the church gates. You are to go *in peace*, the necessary requirement before you can love and serve the Lord. And you will respond "In the name of Christ, Amen", grounding your service of Christ in Christ himself. So I pray that you will indeed, once the service is over, go in peace to love and serve the Lord.