

# Discipleship and the Holy Spirit

---

Alison Morgan, ReSource

Carlisle Bishop's Staff and Rural Deans Day, October 2010

Reading Matthew 28.18-20

## Introduction

Lisa

Can I start with a story – Lisa (who tells her own story on <http://www.resource-arm.net/articles/godslove.html>)

- Abusive childhood; the death of her brother
- Escape into drugs, relationships; abortions, violence
- Doing a correspondence course on Jesus
- Getting into conversation with a lady doing the flowers – and becoming a Christian through Alpha
- Experiencing God's love through prayer ministry

Why do I start with a cleaner from Leicester? I think Lisa's story, and the story of many others like her, tells us a lot about what it means to become a disciple of Jesus.

I spend a lot of my time thinking about discipleship. I spent 6 years as a university lecturer, then following ordination 12 years on the staff of a church in Leicester, working mostly with small groups and with the healing ministry. For the last 6 years I've been working for ReSource writing discipleship resources of one kind or another and supporting churches in their use. I'm also the editor of a discipleship programme for Africa called *Rooted in Jesus*, which is now in use in 20 dioceses or denominations in 10 countries. And we are finding in ReSource that we are asked so often now about discipleship that we are in the process of adapting *Rooted in Jesus* for use in this country. Now, it seems, is the time for the church to think again about discipleship and what it means.

### What is discipleship?

I think discipleship is an interesting word. It's become a bit of an umbrella term, as we discovered when we devoted one of our magazines to it. Everyone has their own idea of what it means. So I'd like to start by flagging up a couple of key issues.

1. First, discipleship is most commonly understood in academic terms. The word disciple comes from the Latin, *disco*, to learn. And we know about learning – learning means classrooms and universities. It's about understanding, about what we know. And yet this is not what the NT means by discipleship at all. The NT word is not Latin but Greek, and it's *mathetes*. *Mathetes* is not a classroom kind of word – a disciple is not so much a student as an apprentice. Christian discipleship is hands-on learning, it's practical. You can't get to be a disciple by going on a study course.
2. Secondly, discipleship is most commonly understood today in individualistic terms. Again it's not hard to see why – we live in an individualistic society. I have twin daughters, and they've just made their choice of subjects to study for AS levels. They chose them according to their own criteria and following their own interests, and now they are meeting their new teachers. This is radically different from the NT concept of discipleship – for Jesus, discipleship was not an individual process but a community one. His disciples didn't choose a syllabus, they chose a person; and they learned not as individuals but as part of a new community, leaving behind their families and throwing their lot in with one another. They learnt as they travelled on the road together.

So discipleship is a form of apprenticeship undertaken in community. To recognise this radically changes our understanding of it. It means that the focus of our discipleship should be not on what we know but on who we are becoming. And that's where the fun starts, because we aren't becoming plumbers or history teachers, we are becoming like Jesus, the Son of God. Lisa's grasp of biblical hermeneutics is lamentable; but Lisa is a changed and changing person. Recently she went as part of a mission team to a church in Milford. Such was the impact she had that they offered her a job on the staff of the church. A single mother with no qualifications and a background in drugs – moving, through her relationship with others, into the space created for her by Jesus.

## Apprenticed to Jesus

When I have to speak or think about something I like to try and move beyond wherever I was last time I spoke or thought about it. So I stuck 'disciples' into the computer and sat down to look again at what we can learn about discipleship from scripture. The answer for the OT was unexpectedly brief – nothing. The word is only mentioned once, in Isaiah 19.11, where God splutters at the arrogance of those who claim to be disciples 'of the ancient kings' and yet give stupid advice. The answer for the NT was surprising – lots from the gospels, some from Acts where the word 'disciple' is used to denote the followers of Jesus, but from the epistles, again absolutely nothing. Paul, Peter, James and John do not appear use the word at all. If we want to think about discipleship, we are thinking about Jesus and only Jesus.

So what did it mean in practice to be a disciple of Jesus? First of all, a change of direction. One by one they got up and followed him; not just the twelve, but many more, all of whom were called disciples. Most of them remain nameless; but between them they would carry the message he gave them all over the known world. Secondly, it's about learning on the hoof, with a heavy emphasis on putting what's being learnt into practice. To be a disciple of Jesus was to do things, to learn to minister like Jesus. Watch me, he said as he healed the sick, freed the oppressed and offered good news to the poor. Then, off you go in pairs, he said, you have a go, and we'll go through it when you get back. Then finally, I'm off now, and you are to keep on doing it, and teach others to do it too – and, in a weird kind of way which we will come back to – I will still be with you as you do it. Jesus wasn't training rabbis. He could do the rabbi bit, engage in theological reflection with the best of them; but we don't once see him teaching his disciples to do it. No, he wasn't training rabbis; he was training practitioners; it was action he was looking for, not explanation. Thirdly, it's about learning in community, about leaving father and mother, wife and children; it's about loving one another, recognising fellow disciples as brothers and sisters, learning not to compete, learning not to judge, learning to think about other disciples not as independent individuals but as leaves on the same vine, members of the same body, and discovering that a lot of it is actually about what happens in the spaces between you. Paul expands this in his letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians; alone, we are nothing; we exist only in our shared relationship to Jesus. And then fourthly, we see that discipleship hurts. 'Whoever does not carry the cross, whoever does not give up all his possessions, cannot be my disciple.' Discipleship is not an add-on, an extra, a tweak here and there. It's a radical readjustment of priorities. The unexpected and the painful are an inevitable part of the package. This is not a soft option.

How do we sum all this up? Perhaps by saying that to become a disciple of Jesus is to set out on a journey. It's a journey inwards – we will change. If we are prepared to take seriously what Jesus says to us and to try, in company with others, to put it into practice, we will find that we are indeed, as Paul says, transformed day by day into the likeness of Christ, transformed in our minds and hearts, our habits and our relationships. We will grow, as we see those first disciples grow, into the potential we have in Christ. I came across a phrase the other day: I am a shadow of my future self. I like that. I've come a long way. I've got a long way to go. But I am a bit less shadowy than I was.<sup>1</sup>

It's also a journey upwards, a journey outside of space and time, a journey which begins in the ripping of the temple curtain as Jesus, dying, opened up the way back to God. It's a journey through the heavens in the company of Jesus, our high priest, into a place where we stand before the throne of grace. It's a journey into

---

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor 3.18; Romans 12.1-2; Gal 5.19-24.

the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God. It's a journey back to the beginning of time in the presence of the one who spoke the world, and a journey into eternity and the place he has prepared for us in a new heaven and a new earth.<sup>2</sup>

And finally, it's a journey outwards, a journey towards other people. Go, and make disciples of all nations, Jesus said; baptise them, teach them. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Whoever receives one whom I send receives me. We are to invite others to join us in our journey, winning them by the purity and reverence of our lives. 'Beauty of life causes strangers to join our ranks,' wrote Minucius Felix in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century; 'we do not talk about great things; we live them.'<sup>3</sup>

I suppose this is why the first Christian disciples were known as followers of The Way.<sup>4</sup> The kind of learning we do as disciples is a travelling kind of learning. Being a disciple is about going somewhere. It's not really an alternative to not going anywhere, because life sweeps us up in its own agendas anyway. It's about intentionally going somewhere, choosing the narrow path rather than the broad one. Disciple making, Alan Hirsch has said, 'is the irreplaceable and lifelong task of becoming like Jesus by embodying his message.'<sup>5</sup> It's not a syllabus, it's a journey, in the company of others and in apprenticeship to the Son of God.

## The tools of discipleship: Spirit and Word

When Jesus took his leave of those first eleven remaining disciples, nearing the end of the first part of their apprenticeship, he said to them, '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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember,' he said, 'that I am with you always, to the end of the age.' Except he didn't quite say always, he said, 'I am with you all of the days.' Jesus promises to be with them every day. That's weird, isn't it, as we said, and just as he takes his leave. How can this be? It's John who explains it best. 'Peace be with you,' he said, coming into their locked room the evening after his resurrection. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' And in that instant, all Jesus's previous teaching must have become clear, all that stuff about a Spirit of truth, an advocate who will come to them, one who will take what is Jesus's and declare it to them, one who will turn their pain to joy, who will make it possible for them to ask anything in the name of Jesus and receive it. He is one who will be the sap in the vine of which they are a part.

And here is the key to our discipleship. Think back to Lisa. Lisa began her journey by doing a correspondence course. But it wasn't the correspondence course that changed her. She continued by having a conversation with a woman doing the flowers. But it wasn't the conversation that changed her. She joined an Alpha course. Even that didn't change her, it just opened a door for her. She went through the door. There she met Jesus. Jesus led her to a group of people with whom she began a new journey. She began to realise she could talk to God in prayer. And through the prayer she was overwhelmed by the cleansing, renewing presence of the Holy Spirit. And it was that that changed her.

The key ingredient to our discipleship is the Holy Spirit. We cannot follow Jesus without the Holy Spirit, because Jesus is, clearly, not here. No puzzling conversations about fasting or sabbaths, no masterclasses in casting out particularly resistant evil spirits, no incomprehensible trips up mountains or nights spent in gardens, no surreal stories, no disappearing and reappearing tricks. None of that is available to us. What is available to us we now find within ourselves, in the person of the Holy Spirit. If discipleship is anything, it has to be Trinitarian, linking us to Father, Son and Spirit.

---

<sup>2</sup> Mark 15.38; Hebrews 4.16; Ephesians 3.18.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 28.18-20; John 20.21; John 13.20; 1 Peter 3.2.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 9.2; 19.9; 19.23; 22.4; 24.14; 24.22.

<sup>5</sup> *The Forgotten Ways*, Brazos Press 2007.

# The fruit and gifts of the Spirit

## Fruit

So how does the Holy Spirit help us in our discipleship. Well, we've already talked about a journey inwards, and I think we are all familiar with that. The Spirit teaches us, encourages us and changes us. The best known passages which talk about the changes are probably Romans 7 to 8 and Galatians 5. To the Romans Paul talks about the power of the Spirit within us, helping us to overcome sin, helping us to become the people we truly want to be as we journey onwards into the likeness of Christ. To the Galatians he talks about the fruit of the Spirit which grows in us, so that we become full not of fear and envy and anger, but of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. To the Ephesians and Colossians he says it's like putting off an old identity and putting on a new one – if I were in Africa at this point I'd be asking someone to march around in a visibly tattered coat, and offering them a nice new one to put on instead. Or, he says, mixing his metaphors rather, it's like walking in light rather than in darkness. We know all these passages, and we have no objection to them – as Paul says, there is no law against these things, and nobody will mind if you are joyful rather than miserable, full of light rather than of darkness, new rather than old.

The question for me is, how do we help people to grow this fruit, wear this new coat, walk in this light? Often I think we kind of assume it happens by magic, or that failing that it's a nice idea but in practice unrealistic. I was listening to a talk Stephen Cottrell gave at New Wine this year, and he was quoting a survey by some disappointed people who had found that in practice there was no discernible difference in the behaviour and lifestyle of Christians and non Christians. Again, I think it's about making space for people to grow in – and not any kind of space, but space where we depend specifically on the Holy Spirit. That means small groups, prayer groups, cell groups, call them what you will – it means recreating, in our church fellowships, places where people can together become apprentices of Jesus, where together they can study his word, rely on his Spirit, and above all think of stuff they can actually do. We may need process evangelism, but I think we also need process discipleship. Preferably hands dirty, risk taking, travelling discipleship. What the Church of England needs more than anything else at the moment, Sue Hope wrote in her book *Mission-Shaped Spirituality*, is an adventure.<sup>6</sup> An adventure, perhaps, into true discipleship.

## Gifts

And that takes us on to the second way in which the Holy Spirit informs our discipleship. A couple of years ago Martin suggested I write something on the gifts of the Spirit. To be honest I wasn't that keen – we all know about those, we've been there, done that, haven't we, and it's possible, perhaps, to get a bit obsessive about 1 Corinthians 12? But Martin's an insistent sort of bloke, so I set to. And the more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that there's nothing special about 1 Corinthians 12 except this – it describes the ministry of Jesus. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,' he'd said on the first day of his active ministry, 'because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' And then he began to do it – we know the story. It then turned out that he expected his disciples to do it too: 'Proclaim the good news: the kingdom of heaven has come near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.' And then, eventually, the Great Commission, telling them not just to do this but to teach others to do it too – everything he had commanded them themselves to do.<sup>7</sup>

So instead of poring over the gifts and trying to come up with neat definitions, I decided to reread the gospels and see if I could relate any of this to the ministry of Jesus. I sat down with John and Luke. I found 80 instances in each of the use of a gift or gifts of the Spirit as described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12. I found another 66 examples in the Book of Acts. It's all there. It's clear that without the gifts of the Spirit we have neither the right nor the power to minister the gospel. To be a disciple of Jesus is to do the things that Jesus did – so I called the book, *Doing what Jesus did*. It's to pray for healing, it's to discern spirits, it's to seek

---

<sup>6</sup> 'What the Church of England could do with possibly more than anything else at present is an adventure'. The clergy may need it more than anyone else. We need to cross boundaries, take risks, travel into unknown places, risk offence and danger.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 4.18-19; Matt 10.8, Matt 28.18-20.

wisdom, it's to know things about the people we minister to that we could not otherwise know, and so on. It's to go right outside our comfort zone of competency, and to encourage our fellow apprentices to do the same. Discipleship is not about evening classes, it's about a new way of life. Anything less and we sell it short – sell the whole gospel short.

What does this mean in practice? Well, for some people it means highly charismatic things. Healing on the Streets, for example. For others it means ordinary, practical, Christlike service. I think of a dustman in Manchester who invites people to put stick it notes with prayer requests on their dustbins. A group in Leicester whose offer to litter pick in the local comprehensive school grounds so amazed the head that she joined the church. An amazing story told by John Drane, whose hairdresser, horrified by the failures of the duty clergyman at her brother's funeral asked him to teach her to pray – then and there, in the salon. A vicar who found all his unexpected new church members lived near one particular couple who had refused to help in the Sunday school or be churchwarden, but had showered acts of kindness on their neighbours. A boy from a non Christian family, invited to a church holiday club, now about to start a year as a worship pastor at St Aldate's. A teenage girl, healed from recurrent cancer through prayer, now posting messages on facebook telling others what it means to follow Jesus. Discipleship, perhaps, can often be defined as ordinary things coming out of extraordinary ones. Ordinary people, banded together in their determination to follow an extraordinary God.

## Discipleship in action – Rooted in Jesus

A lot of my convictions about discipleship come from what I've seen over the last 10 years in Africa. You don't need me to tell you that life in Africa is tough. We work mostly in rural areas, where poverty is high, educational opportunity and life expectancy low, traditional religion oppressive and the future uncertain. It started in 2002 when a diocesan missionary from Tanzania came to stay with us in Leicester. God has been speaking to me, he said, from Matthew 28. You need to know that Stanley is the regional director of the Jesus Film ministry in E Africa, and sees thousands of people come to Christ each year. 'God has been saying to me that it's not enough to make converts. You must make disciples.' But how, Stanley said? We have few leaders and no materials. The result was *Rooted in Jesus*, an interactive and practical discipleship course for groups of people who do need to be committed but don't need to be literate. We introduce it through training conferences in which we spend a third of the time in prayer, and there are now groups all over sub saharan Africa.

When the first generation of groups in Tanzania completed the course, we went back to ask them how they had got on. We hoped to hear they'd found it very helpful. What we actually did hear took us completely by surprise.

To start with, talking to the group leaders was like talking to a completely different bunch of people from the nervous and deferential ones we'd met with 4 years earlier. They looked taller, stronger, more determined. One after another they said they now had great confidence in God, that he was with them and powerful to work through them. Many said they used to read the Bible 'like a newspaper or magazine', but now read it and pray over it daily and find that it speaks to them. Some said that they have lost their fear; that they feel power in preaching; that they feel a love for their group members. Several said their churches are now full; one said his whole village has been transformed.

Secondly, they told us astonishing stories of the changing lives of the group members. One said that on the 4th lesson he had taught his group the memory verse John 1.12, which says 'to all who received him he gave power to become children of God'. He said they hadn't known that. They were just churchgoers, and they'd not heard of the Holy Spirit or realised any act of commitment was necessary. He explained the verse and the whole group was filled with the Holy Spirit. Other leaders said their people had stopped worshipping the wrong God, had been praying for the sick and seeing healings, had stopped using drugs and smoking, and were no longer getting drunk or beating their wives (in a survey in Uganda 41% of men admitting to beating

their wives).<sup>8</sup> Some had been inspired to learn to read and write so they could read the Bible. Prayer was becoming normal in the villages; in one Masai village the elders were still meeting under the tree to take decisions, but now they pray over those decisions. People were sharing their faith and others were coming to Christ; illiterate people were teaching others from the memory verses. Everywhere group members were speaking out against witchcraft and had stopped putting 'medicines' on crops. A woman who had been bitten by a snake came to the group for prayer instead of visiting the witchdoctor; and was healed. A child who used to fall down all the time was prayed for until he was healed, with the result that the whole family came to Christ and joined the group. They told us stories of individual lives changing – an illiterate woman who prays for the sick and sees them healed, a man known for his anger whose 12 wives were so amazed by the change in him that they all joined the group, a Muslim who felt his feet burning as he passed the church where they were meeting, came in and came to Christ. All of them said their churches had stopped being impersonal Sunday gatherings and become active fellowships of people committed to God and to one another. One said his entire village had been transformed. It's been the same in other places – I could tell you story after story from Mozambique, from Zambia, from South Africa where the Bishop Martin Breytenbach says he is seeing people and congregations set on fire with the love of Jesus.

To what do we attribute this? As I listened to these Tanzanians, most of whom have no secondary education, I was taken back to a particular day 4 years earlier when we first met with them. We stood in a church in a small, dusty town called Engusero and worshipped God together. As we sang, the Spirit came into the building – I know when he does because a bird always sings. People experienced great joy, received new spiritual gifts. Some were healed. And as we worshipped, we received a prophecy from God that if his people in this forgotten part of Tanzania continued to pray and seek his face as they were doing that day, he would bless them. Never have I seen such a large group of people so changed in such a short space of time.

I thought I'd ask them what advice they had for new leaders in other places. The one thing they all agreed on was this: Depend on the Holy Spirit, they said. Four years earlier they'd said the Holy Spirit was something Pentecostals did. Now he'd become a living reality. I was so overwhelmed I cried.

A couple of Christmases ago there was a fascinating article by Matthew Parris in *The Times*. His headline was *As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God*. 'Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good.' Christianity, he concludes, sets people free. Indeed, removing it from the African equation' may leave the continent at the mercy of a malign fusion of Nike, the witch doctor, the mobile phone and the machete.'<sup>9</sup>

## Discipleship in the UK – ReSource

So what about us. Does that apply here too? I think it does. We are less desperate, and so less motivated perhaps, but we are on, or could be on, the same journey. ReSource is committed to trying to help churches build apprenticeship communities, starting not in some pre-defined place but wherever they are now. That means different things for different people, and so we have put together different resources, and we have a nationwide network of people able to support those using them. We have a heart for the little, the local and the ordinary, and our conviction is that discipleship should be parish based and not centrally organised, because it has to be relational; that it should be not about what we know but about who we are becoming; and that it should be in a form which has a constant and varied practical application. And finally, that it should not dependent on highly qualified leaders with charismatic personalities – it's for ordinary people.

Let me close with a quote from Brian McLaren, who casts discipleship in post 9/11 language:

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert Guest: *The Shackled Continent – Africa's past, present & future*, Pan Books 2005, p110

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/matthew\\_parris/article5400568.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/matthew_parris/article5400568.ece)

- ‘When groups of seemingly disparate people defect and band together in the way of Jesus, they form what we might call unterror cells. They secretly plot detonations of hope. They quietly conspire to set off explosions of spontaneous kindness. They plan gentle coup d’états to replace regimes of domination and oppression with movements of empowerment and service. In a complete overthrow of violent terrorism, they fly airplanes of generosity into towers of need and plant improvised encouragement devices by roadsides and in neighbourhoods everywhere, seeking God’s kingdom and God’s equity.’<sup>10</sup>

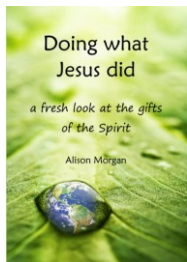


This is discipleship in action. It takes time and courage to become a disciple.

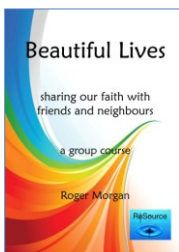
## Discipleship resources from ReSource



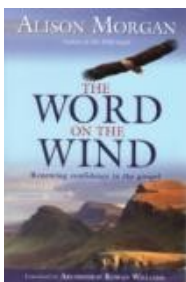
*Beyond Ourselves* is the first book of *The God Who is There*, ReSource’s new discipleship course for small groups. The course aims to help people learn how to embark on the kind of relationship with Christ which will make a difference to the way in which they live their lives. This first book asks the question ‘is there anything beyond ourselves?’ or ‘is God there?’ By the end of the book, group members should be able to say ‘Yes, I am sure God is there, because I have experienced him for myself.’ Edited by Roger Morgan with Anita Benson.



*Doing What Jesus Did – a fresh look at the gifts of the Spirit*, by Alison Morgan. Fully illustrated with plenty of real life stories and testimonies, this is a readable and original introduction to a key topic about which little has been written in recent years. It includes a group study.



*Beautiful Lives* is a group course which helps church members develop the confidence to share their faith naturally and effectively with friends, family, colleagues and neighbours. 1 Peter 3.2-4 speaks of the beauty and reverence which should characterise our lives as Christians, and Roger believes that it is beautiful lives, lived in the power of the Holy Spirit, which lead others to faith.



To read more about discipleship see my new book *The Word on the Wind: renewing confidence in the gospel*. With a foreword by Rowan Williams and an introduction by Martin Cavender.

To find out more about any of these publications visit the [ReSource](http://ReSource) website. We are delighted to work with and support churches which use the materials, so that they may be of maximum benefit as part of the ongoing life of the church.

<sup>10</sup> Brian McLaren, *Everything must change*, Thomas Nelson 2007, p130.