

INTRODUCTION

“Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me,’ Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.” (Mark 2:13-15)

The call to follow Jesus has spanned twenty centuries. It is just as real today as the challenge He posed to the original Group of Twelve who walked with Him along the dusty roads of Palestine from Galilee to Calvary and beyond.

Or is it?

Can we really be followers of Jesus in an age where everyone wants (and is encouraged) to be “the head and not the tail”; the “top dog”; the leader, not the follower; the master, not the slave (“Who is he, to tell me what to do?”), where the blessing of God is assumed to be measured by degrees of material gain (in the West, at least) and the message is watered down and privatized because “there are no longer any absolutes” and we are called on to fit into a neat pluralistic social framework?

If Jesus met His disciples in the marketplace today, would He recognize them (us!) as such? Many would be too busy striving to be “winners” to hear the call.

I recently attended an Executive Leadership Program in Hong Kong that was sponsored by a major government department. One thing all participants agreed on was that there is a lot of emphasis in the corporate world on “Leadership”, but very little on “Followership”. After all, no one wants to be a follower; there are fewer benefits and even less kudos. Embark on a tour of the local Christian bookshop and you are likely to encounter the same paradigm. You will discover there is a lot of material about how to be better leaders, but comparatively little on being better followers. There are few “discipleship” manuals. How can this be? Has our Christian world view drifted so far from the original mandate?

“Follow me”.

I walked through a park in central Hong Kong the morning after the last day of the program described above, thinking about the new models, plans, mission, transformational vision and authority structures my leaders wished to inculcate. After a while, my mind turned to my life as a Christian and I reflected on the gaps that remained to be bridged between faith and life. I tried to imagine a roadmap to the kind of discipleship Jesus called His followers to embrace. It started to rain, so I entered a church and sat at the back thinking about how Jesus cut a channel between peoples’ ideas, priorities and what mattered to God in the context of eternal values.

As my eyes adjusted to the interior of the church, they fell on a simple altar piece to one side of the nave. It was originally constructed by prisoners in the Shamshuipo internment camp during the Second World War occupation of Hong Kong by Japanese forces. The altar was made of discarded box lids and a brass crucifix found in a rubbish dump by the POWs. As decoration they had used a jam jar filled with fresh flowers. For the Christian men and women who lived and perished in the camp, without human hope, the notion of discipleship was reduced to daily decisions to put Jesus first, regardless of the privations they experienced and the cruelties they witnessed. The quality of life in the camp was horrific. There was chronic overcrowding and very little food and water to go around. Medical supplies were inadequate for the frequent outbreaks of diphtheria. The lack of sanitation and hygiene meant many died needlessly. In this midst of these conditions, a group of Christian believers built a small chapel, where they abandoned their denomination tags and met as often as they were able to worship God. Ultimately, discipleship was a choice of the heart and mind, not abandonment to their circumstances.

Confronted by such strength in humility and faith in the face of despair, I was reminded that true leadership begins with surrender, to the Lordship of Christ. (Now, there's a paradox.) The choice that faced the prisoners of war in Shamshuipo is also ours, in a modern, complex, frenetic world.

“Follow me”.

Inscribed on the Shamshuipo altarpiece are the words of the prayer of Richard of Chichester (1197-1253). Never heard of him? You are probably familiar with one of his prayers though. For all his personal struggles Richard understood that discipleship was a daily affair, that being a Christian didn't consist of depending on the peaks of faith, but walking each moment in the footsteps of the Master, Jesus, the humble carpenter-cum-Son of God. As you work through the following series of articles about the Disciple's Mission, let the words of Richard of Chichester ring in your heart and set the scene for surrender and growth.

Thanks to you my Lord Jesus Christ
 For all the benefits you have given me,
 For all the pain and insults you have borne for me.
 O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
 May I know you more clearly,
 Love you more dearly,
 Follow you more nearly,
 Day by day
 Amen.