

Presentation for St Jacut May 2017 by Clare Amos

It is a real pleasure to be here with you again – I think it was three years ago that I was last with you at this lovely place.

This time I am here in a slightly different capacity – I am here because a few months ago I took up the honorary role of Director for Lay Discipleship in this diocese. I negotiated a deal with the bishops that while I continue to work at the World Council of Churches in Geneva – which means really till the end of this year – I would concentrate on finding my way – and then after my retirement it is hoped that I will have the time and capacity to make a rather more substantial contribution. So it is very much still work in progress – although I do have a couple of first fruits I want to share a bit later on. Indeed this presentation itself is also somewhat work in progress – as you will see as I ask your help a bit further along the line. But that is alright as far as I am concerned because my philosophy is actually that my role is not, absolutely not, to tell you what to do or think – rather I passionately believe that what I being asked to do is to help you, especially you who, we who the lay people among us, to take active responsibility for our own learning and make discoveries for ourselves. Indeed that for me is an important part of what the very concept of discipleship means – a desire to keep on learning and exploring more about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. There is a wonderful saying of the late Archbishop Michael Ramsey: To be a theologian is to be exposed to the vision of heaven and the tragedy of mankind. In that sense I believe that it is the calling of all God's people to be theologians, and that it is not a task for which you need a theology degree. And it is the privilege of my role to help you realise that, your calling.

Discipleship has recently become a very popular word in Anglican Christian vocabulary after being rather neglected for a long time. Indeed it has become so popular that a number of people have somewhat reacted against it, people I respect and have known for a long time like Angela Tilby and Martyn Percy. So I have had to do some serious reflection on what discipleship means for me, and why I feel that it is important for the life of the church. When I was interviewed for the role by Bishop David he asked me what resonated with me when I heard the word disciple or discipleship. Off the top of my head, I responded that a primary meaning for me was 'learning' – I spent quite a few years studying Latin so the Latin verb 'disco' meaning 'I learn' flits into my mind very quickly. But I also went on to say that when I heard the word 'disciple' I was reminded of the concept of 'discipline' – which of course ultimately comes from the same word root. And I do think there is a link between disciple and discipline. It is a reminder and an encouragement that an effort needs to be made, that being a disciple is a process that continues and develops over time. I don't find it threatening myself to draw this connection between the two words: there is a Christian classic that is actually called a Celebration of Discipline.

I said that until recently 'Disciple' was a rather neglected concept. Perhaps people might instead speak of 'Lay Ministry' – which actually is something a bit different, so it is a pity that in the programme my session is called 'Training for Lay Ministry' rather than 'Disciple'. That is probably partly my fault as I was a bit vague when I was asked for a title for this talk. But for me 'Lay Ministry' refers to authorised ministries such as that of Reader – and that is not my task in the diocese, though it is conceivable that one of the things I may explore when I have been around for another year or so is whether it would be helpful to give formal diocesan authorisation to the work of lay people who have a specific pastoral role in their local context – what are sometimes called Pastoral Assistants. But discipleship is for everyone, every Christian, and it does not require a licence at all, except perhaps the licence conveyed by our baptism into Christ.

But if the concept of discipleship was previously neglected, particularly in Anglican circles, that has changed radically in recent years. There have been two recent major reports on Discipleship over the

last couple of years – one from the Church of England and the other from the Anglican Communion. (possible pp with titles). Both are accessible on the internet. Discussion of discipleship also features quite large on the Church of England's Fresh Expressions website. And there have been a plethora of books on the topic, several of them written by Methodist figures. The Methodists got to reflecting on discipleship quite a few years before the Anglicans did – indeed the current Methodist understanding of discipleship probably owes not a little to the foundational tradition within Methodism of 'classes' that was inspired by John Wesley.

One of these Methodist contributors begins by saying that discipleship is simply 'following Jesus', and that to understand what discipleship is we need to look first at the Gospel narratives in which people are called to follow Jesus. He goes on to say that the etymology of the very Greek word that we translate as 'disciple' – the Greek word is *mathetes* - means something like 'learning by following', reminding us that in the Jewish milieu of Jesus' ministry a Rabbi's disciples would learn from him, not by sitting in a classroom but by following him round and watching him at work. I have to be honest and say that having checked my own Greek dictionaries I am not completely convinced that the actual word *mathetes* carries quite that weight – but none the less the linking of following and learning is I think an important clue to the nature of discipleship.

And if we are to start with the Gospel calls to 'follow Jesus' we discover something very interesting. Let's focus on the figure of Peter: I do think that Peter is portrayed in the Gospels as the archetypal disciple. I suspect you are fairly familiar with Jesus' call to follow him in the Synoptic Gospels. In Mark and in Matthew they are presented as the very first words Jesus ever says to Peter. In Luke the sequence is slightly different – and Peter must have known Jesus before the moment when Jesus invites, or perhaps even compels, him to leave his nets, follow him and fish for people. But John's Gospel is different again. For what I find utterly fascinating is that although various people are spoken of as following Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel of John – looking through chapter 1 of the Gospel we can see that that includes two of the disciples of John the Baptist, Andrew, Peter's brother and Philip, very carefully, but I am sure quite deliberately Peter himself is not given the command 'Follow me'. He is given a new name when he meets, 'You are Simon, son of John; You are to be called Cephas, which is translated Peter', but the word 'follow' is not used in association with him.

Of course there is a moment in the Gospel of John when Peter is commanded by Jesus 'Follow me', and you may remember where it is. It is at the very end of the Gospel, after the resurrection by the Lake again, as the culmination of what I call the story of the breakfast on the beach. Three times Jesus speaks to Peter using his original name, 'Simon son of John do you love me'... and it is only after he has responded affirmatively three times, and then also received a prediction of his own death that Jesus finally says to him, 'Follow me.' And then this is repeated a few verses further along, and indeed they are the last words that Jesus says to Peter in this Gospel. I think it is quite deliberate that in John's Gospel the call to Peter to 'Follow me' comes at the very end of the story. I can be sure of that partly because there is a mysterious little exchange between Jesus and Peter at the Last Supper in John 13, Jesus said to Peter, 'Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, but you will follow me afterwards.'

It was a frisson moment when I first realised years ago the significance of the way that John's Gospel had placed the call to Peter to 'Follow me' at the end rather than the beginning of the story. And thinking about our topic today of discipleship it is a valuable reminder that the response to follow Jesus is something that we make again and again throughout our Christian lives, learning as we go along each time a little more as to what it may mean, as indeed was true of Peter. I often think that one way of describing the life all of us have as Christians is that, like Peter, we live between those two moments of 'follow me.' That for me sums up the nature of discipleship. We are here having

answered the challenge offered by the first call, but we are still being made ready to respond fully to the deeper challenge of the second, the one that can only come 'afterwards', after we have learned not only to accompany Jesus in his life, but also through his death. How precisely this works out may differ for each of us individually depending on our own personal Christian story – but we are all in some way travelling with Jesus on a journey that began with our response to his first grace-filled invitation, may have taken us through some mistaken twists and turns, but gradually enables us to come to understand more about the nature of our travelling companion on the road, and eventually begin to discern all that it might mean for us, preparing us to begin to make our fuller response. So the call to follow leads us into the learning process of discipleship, and the ongoing renewal of the understanding of what it means to follow.

For me, one of the features that I most treasure about our Christian scriptures is the fact that we have four Gospels. Four different presentations of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It somehow says to me that at the heart of our faith is a precious jewel that sparkles in different directions, and that it would be impossible for one presentation alone to catch the whole of its light. And actually the fact that there are four Gospels, not one, is important for the life of discipleship, it is an affirmation in the heart of our scripture that spirituality is not a one size fit all phenomenon, but that God can use our different interests, strengths and weaknesses to draw us deeper into following Christ.

The differences between the Gospels have been explored in a number of different ways. I think it was Leslie Francis who linked them to Myers-Briggs typology, suggesting that people with different Myers-Briggs profiles tend to gravitate to one or other of the Gospels as their preferred presentation of Jesus. I think the Foundations 21 programme, which was for a while used within the diocese employed the same idea.

Another example – perhaps not quite so serious – is one that Alan my husband and I explored, came up through a series of emails Alan and I sent to each other in my early years working and living in Geneva, while he was still ministering in the United Kingdom. We had some really good conversations by email. One of them was to ask each other the question – if the evangelists, the gospel writers, were around today – what Christian church or denomination would they belong to?

For me I thought that Mark would probably be a Methodist, though Alan argued that he would have been a member of the Plymouth Brethren, probably of the Open variety. Matthew felt a bit obvious – probably a Roman Catholic I thought, though Alan wondered if there was a touch of Serbian Orthodox around somewhere. If you want to know the reasons for that – ask me afterwards. As regards John, I think we both homed in Greek Orthodox – though Alan thought perhaps a touch of Syrian Orthodox as well. But when it came to Luke – there was absolutely no question. We were both sure that if Luke were around today he would definitely be an Anglican. As it happens Luke isn't necessarily the Gospel I cherish the most myself, but I am still sure that he would be an Anglican.

But back to discipleship. A Methodist friend of mine, Roger Walton, whose reflections on discipleship have been influential in Church of England circles, has looked at the four Gospels through the lens of discipleship, and suggests that their different emphases can help us constructively explore the meaning and what he calls the rhythm of discipleship.

Roger suggests that the formation of healthy and flourishing Christian disciples has three key elements to it. These are mission; worship, and community. And he links each of these elements to one of the Gospels, Mark with mission, Luke with worship, and John with community.

First Roger spends a few pages looking over the early chapters of Mark, which are of course remarkable for the breathless speed with which the ministry of Jesus begins, and he then sums up

Mark's understanding of discipleship as follows: "To be a disciple is to hear the call of Jesus, to take up that call and follow him, to let go of everything to engage in God's mission and be transformed in the process." The primary formational tool for discipleship in Mark's Gospel is active participation in the mission of Jesus. It is interesting in fact that the disciples are sent out by Jesus to engage in mission on his behalf in Mark 6, before they really realise who Jesus is, which only comes at the end of Mark 8. And notice the use of the word transformation – which I will come back to.

Then Roger turns to explore the Gospel of Luke, and notes the high place that is given to worship in this Gospel. In fact of course the Gospel both begins with worship, Zechariah in the Temple in Jerusalem, and ends with it too, as the nascent Christian community worship the ascending Jesus and then return to the Temple in Jerusalem to bless God. In preparing for this talk I came across a wonderful definition of worship that is something like this: worship is loving God in the presence of our fellow human beings, and loving our fellow human beings in the presence of God. Worship forms disciples by placing us within a larger narrative, engaging us in meaning-making, forming our attitudes and orientation, and involving us in encountering difference. Above all worship somehow opens us to the grace of God. It is in worship that disciples are formed and transformed. Worship, like mission, leads us to encounter God because it is a place of honesty, risk and faith, and it is a space shared with others who have also discovered Jesus and want to journey with him. Then the third element – community – which is linked in this schema to the Gospel of John. It is John's Gospel of course that speaks of the new commandment... that you love one another... by this shall everyone know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

And just before he had spoken these words at the Last Supper Jesus has given a demonstration of the nature of that love, by the humble service of washing the feet of his disciples. I personally have one or two questions about whether John's Gospel does teach us all we need to know about Christian community ... but certainly it seems reasonable to use the Gospel of John as a starting point for our reflection. Roger's summary is succinct: Churches wishing to form disciples of Jesus must be intentional in their living. The clear pattern of Christian living in Christian communities is a place where disciples are formed.

There are a couple of observations I want to make at this point. First, given the discussion that came up this morning during Meg's bible study, I think it is impossible to separate out the individual and communal dimensions, for we can, as individual human beings only express and grow our discipleship if we are willing to participate in community. Worship and mission – as well as community itself – are communal experiences. And second that I find myself hearing again and again in relation to discipleship the language of transformation, which is for me a key, both for individuals themselves and the Christian communities in which they are placed. It was interesting that the Archdeacon yesterday evening in his viticultural sermon, spoke about the importance of transformational leadership. Interesting too of course that the two material elements at the heart of Christian worship – bread and wine – are both elements which have needed to undergo an explicit process of transformation to reach their current form, and, in Christian and certainly Anglican, belief, undergo a further process of transformation during the course of the worship itself.

If you are still awake... it is after all the middle of the afternoon, you will probably have noticed that there is a fourth Gospel that we haven't yet touched on – that of Matthew. That of course is interesting in that Matthew is the Gospel par excellence which is most associated with education – indeed it is only in Matthew's Gospel that the verbal form of 'disciple' appears in the New Testament. It comes twice – quite obviously at the end of the Gospel in the resurrected Jesus' Great Commission: Go and make disciples of all nations. It also however appears in an intriguing verse at the end of Matthew 13, Where the Gospel speaks of 'every scribe who has been disciplined for the Kingdom of heaven is like the Master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' Some people think that Matthew, whose own name sounded very like the Greek word for disciple 'mathetes' is here cryptically referring to himself. I hope to come back to this in a few

minutes. Roger suggests that Christian education is indeed an important aspect of the formation of disciples but he would see it in secondary – though not unimportant – terms, whose role is to extend the understanding of disciples by drawing on their experience in mission, worship and community. I think that has been recognised in recent work in the area of Christian adult education – for example the *Pilgrim* booklets that offer really good introductions to key aspects of Christian belief and Christian life are very much written from this basis.

Perhaps this is the point to share two definitions of discipleship that I have come across. The first is :

- TO be a disciple is to be called to a life of learning and formation in the likeness of Christ. Jesus calls men and women to be disciples: to learn from him, to pattern their lives upon his life, to follow him. Disciples are formed and sustained primarily through the grace of God seen in the witness of the local church. The local church is a community dedicated to a life of prayer, learning, service and worship. The community live this out when they gather on Sunday for worship. At the end of the service the congregation are sent out to live their discipleship in daily life.

You can see in this a summary of what we have been talking about in our exploration of discipleship and the four Gospels.

The second is in its essence much shorter, but I have to say I found it captivating. It can be found on the Fresh Expressions website: Discipleship is a journey into the heart of God's love.

It reminds me of those words of TS Eliot: A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.

The website then expands by talking about the four dimensions of discipleship as being

- upward to God, as believers learn to listen to the Spirit, get to know Jesus better and grow in love with the Father;
- inward to the self, as believers gain insight into what makes them tick and pray that the Spirit will bring their passions into the embrace of God's love;
- outward to the world, as believers grow in compassion for those in need, and become more active in promoting justice, protecting creation and shaping culture in line with kingdom values;
- sideways to other Christians, as believers contribute to the whole body of Christ and are strengthened by the body.

In fact it is quite interesting to see how these four dimensions do interface to a very considerable degree with the formational language of mission, worship, community and education that we have looked at earlier.

Back in February Bishop Robert asked me to work on drawing up a Rule of Life for the Diocese, or at least for us who express our Christian commitment as members of it. That felt a huge honour and a great responsibility. I am working on it, and indeed I have been looking at examples offered by other dioceses and individual churches, including at least one within this diocese. I believe that such a Rule of Life would need to draw in those formational aspects of mission, worship and community, and education, and would need to acknowledge the four dimensions I have just referred to. I think it also needs to hold together the individual and the communal dimensions allowing both to strengthen the other, it is in a sense a Rule both for the diocese as a corporate organism and for we the individual Christians who form it But I do believe that it is not something that I can offer ready made now – now is the time to share the idea with you and invite your input into the work. I am ready to receive thoughts and suggestions either while I am still here, or by email in the next few weeks. I have copied for you something that links into this ... that you might like to take away and read and factor in to your reflections... in some ways it is interesting to read it alongside the diocesan strategy and see how they might inform the other. (Copies provided of 'Ten Marks of a diocese committed to developing disciples').

There are just a couple of things I want to say in conclusion .

I think that it is important that our exploration of Discipleship takes seriously our context. And by that I mean first that we are Anglicans, and second that we are Anglicans in the Diocese of Europe. For me a motif which seems to sum up my ideal ethos of Anglicanism is that of the 'transfiguration'. *(I said more on this but unscripted)* This sense of 'transfiguration' is for me encapsulated within what is called the 'Signposts statement' which suggests that the Anglican Way is Formed by Scripture; Shaped by Worship; Ordered by Communion; Directed by God's Mission.

And as regards being Disciples in Europe – this reflection forms part of the recent Anglican Communion report on Discipleship:

Discipleship in Europe is marked by special blessings and challenges:

(a) That our witness and ministry take place within the particular context of being guests yet offering hospitality.

(b) That we are committed to Ecumenism at all levels, not least through our Agreements with other Churches, such as Porvoo and Meissen.

(c) That Anglicans often worship in churches and buildings graciously shared with us by those of other Confessions.

(d) That in Europe we are part of a minority Church present within larger faith communities and Churches, in some places where the majority of the population belong to one denomination (Lutherans in Scandinavia, Orthodox in Greece).

(e) That we live and pray alongside people of other Christian traditions and of other faiths, such as the Muslim communities in Turkey and the ancient Jewish communities throughout Europe, not forgetting that many of the countries in which we worship were at war and occupied less than a century ago.

(f) That the diocese (of the Church of England) to which we belong covers a vast geographic territory and is characterized by diverse political, social, and economic realities.

Growing discipleship in Europe has to be considered in this context and requires flexibility of approach and willingness to explore different ways of reaching, resourcing, and sustaining God's people.