

**A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran at Whitfords Community Church, Third Sunday after Epiphany 2005
(Based on Matthew 4: 12-25)**

“In our society the majority of Christians, myself included, have mortgages which incline us to conservative horizons and make us virtually indistinguishable from our more secular neighbours”, so writes Ann Morisy in her penetrating book Beyond the Good Samaritan.¹ Ann raises the issue what have we done to the radical teaching of Jesus and his apprenticeship method of discipling that is such a stark contrast to our bookish ways of forming Christians.

The usual method in churches if someone shows a desire to become a Christian is to put them into a study programme. Many of these study programmes operate on a view that the searcher is an empty vessel that has to be filled with Christian knowledge. These courses often take little or no account of the person's previous life experience, assume that people will be changed by absorbing information, and that content is the means of establishing Christian character.

A learning method “action/reflection” has begun to be practised by our church. This method seeks to enable people to reflect upon and explore their experience, to discern the meaning within their experience. T. S. Eliot (the great English poet) has a line in one of his Quartets that describes the condition this method seeks to redress,

they had the experience but missed the meaning.

That dilemma seems to dog many, many people whose lives are rich in experience, filled with fertile religious experience, but such experience remains unexplored, unknown to them simply because such folk have neither had the method nor opportunity nor the provocation to explore their own internal richness. Such religious experience, direct personal awareness of God (often through the wonder of creation) remains locked away from their awareness, like some deeply buried ore body that lies dormant and undetected.

Ann Morisy who has worked for some years as the Community Ministry Advisor for the diocese of London agonizes over the lack of distinctiveness between Christians and our secular pagan neighbours. Much of this lack of distinctiveness is traceable to our economic captivity. As she said we all have to service mortgages and that inclines us to caution, not to risk our major investment and security. And this caution and focus on personal lifestyle filters our openness and obedience to the teaching of Jesus.

We rationalise as culturally conditioned the more imperative demands of Jesus about lack of concern for self, of not worrying, of openness to others, of social inversions where the least, the last, the lost and the left out receive our priority. I remember once (not cruelly, I hope) an incident at an international summer school in Canterbury after Bishop John Taylor had in a bible study developed the social inversions preached by Jesus. An obviously wealthy American woman whose hands were dripping with jewelled rings accosted the bishop with,

“didn't Jesus say anything nice about the rich?”

The fishermen whom Jesus called into discipleship were middle-class property people. They had their own boats, obviously able to pay all the taxes imposed upon them by the Roman Government and the Jewish establishment, and their own homes. Matthew's text gives no indication in itself that any of the four had heard Jesus or had previous contact with him. The summons comes ‘out of the blue’, as we say.

¹ Ann Morisy. 1997. Beyond the Good Samaritan. London: Continuum, p.13.

They respond, immediately. In order to heighten the point about the radicalness of their response, Matthew mentions three times the father of James and John. Their action in following Jesus is a severe breach of cultural and religious requirements -the leaving of their father, the breaking of family ties. The 'conservative horizon' has been breached in their immediate response.

The radical response resonates, however, with the awareness that a new era has begun. Indeed, this is the substance of Jesus' own proclamation - that the Kingdom of Heaven has begun to arrive. The verb in Greek is in the perfect tense which indicates that a past action has a continuing present effect. So in Jesus the Kingdom of Heaven has not just come and gone with him; rather, the Kingdom of Heaven is continuing to be realised, often in the most surprising places, and through surprising people.

The first disciples in their immediate response establish a bench-mark about discipleship. Discipleship is a full, radical response that takes us out of our previous world-view, places Jesus and his preaching at the centre of our understanding, and radicalises us in living from the values of Jesus' preaching about the Kingdom of Heaven.

At least, that is what it did not those first disciples Andrew and Peter, James and John. Yet by the time Matthew writes his gospel for his Christian community, it is apparent that his church is a mix of people in the practice of their faith. So Matthew reports Jesus saying,

Not everyone who says to me , "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of my heavenly Father.²

And Matthew tells the parable of the wheat and the tares³ (weeds) that are left for sorting to harvest (the last judgement). Such a story indicates a membership that is not uniformly radicalised by the gospel.

From her experience of working on the ground with churches in difficult social environments in London, Ann Morisy suggests that

churches need to give their members more help with the task of being a disciple. Typically, emphasis gets placed on forming disciples who pray more frequently, and read their Bibles more thoroughly. We may even be cajoled into joining a weekly fellowship group. Commitment to activities such as these, along with regular financial giving, are, the Church seems to suggest, the key ingredients of discipleship. But such activities seem remarkable puny for those who claim to be followers of the Son of God who took himself to Jerusalem and to the cross.⁴

Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed in the last days of Hitler's regime in Nazi Germany warned that

when faith gets reduced to a matter of private concern, too much is ceded to advancing secularism.⁵

The implication of Bonhoeffer's teaching is that the task of the local church is not just to give Christians opportunity to worship, but also to create opportunities for Christians and others to engage

² Matthew 7:21

³ Matthew 13:24-30.

⁴ Ann Morisy. 1997. op.cit. p.14.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Letters and Papers from Prison. Ed. E. Bethge, London: SCM. 1971.

in public action. Such public action might be a community ministry which is the local church marshalling a response to a social issue in its community.

Of course, this presupposes that the members and leaders of the local church actually know their local community. This is not always the case. We can live in our communities comfortably isolated from and unaware of the social issues going on around us.

Ann Morisy is an articulate, convincing advocate for such community ministry which she sees as expressing radical discipleship and embodying the counter-cultural values of the kingdom of Heaven. She argues for community ministry to be a way of forming disciples. She writes

Community ministry enables Christians and others to engage in a struggle which is wider than that of concern for our own well-being or that of our own household. In this way it profoundly challenges the corrupted view of faith as something which feeds our personal well-being.⁶

She makes a further point in order to hearten us towards community ministry that the worst state of humankind is not our sinfulness, because a central tenet of our faith is that sins can be forgiven; it is the cessation of struggle, since this is a rejection of the creation process in which we are called to participate by God.⁷

Struggle features prominently in the ministry of Jesus and in the formation of those first disciples, Andrew and Peter, James and John. Indeed, struggle is a motif in the parables of the Kingdom too.

In our time and place of extraordinary affluence we are in danger of not being able to exercise authentic discipleship imbued with the values and priorities of the preaching of Jesus. Therefore, one way of authenticating our discipleship is to join the struggle of others.

Joining the struggle of others can help transform our lives too. This is illustrated by what happened to members of a Baptist church as a result of their involvement in a debt advice centre.

The story is related on pp 17 and 18 of Beyond the Good Samaritan.

Remember Ann Morisy's words:

Community ministry enables Christians and others to engage in a struggle which is wider than that of concern for our own well-being or that of our own household. In this way it profoundly challenges the corrupted view of faith as something which feeds our personal well-being.

Becoming involved in community ministry might imitate the radical response to Jesus of Andrew and Peter, James and John who at once left their nets, left the boat and their father, and followed Jesus.⁸

⁶ Ann Morisy. 1997.op.cit. p.19.

⁷ Ann Morisy. 1997. loc.cit.

⁸ Matthew 4:20 and 22.