

A Reflective Talk Given on Chapter One of "Being Disciples" by Rowan Williams
For St. Mary's Lent Series Week 1

What is it to be a disciple of Jesus? Rowan Williams tells us it is a state of "being". It is not what we do, but what we are in God. This made me think of the Martha and Mary story in Luke Chapter 10 – when Jesus goes to dinner at their house; Martha is rushing about getting everything ready and Mary is sat at Jesus' feet. Martha gets annoyed and whinges to Jesus who in turn sets her straight – what Mary is doing is the right thing. She is listening to Jesus. Williams says in this first chapter that discipleship has something to do with *staying*. We must assume then that by being with God any good works come from that being not the other way around. Our actions come from our being in the presence of God and our desire to live that worship in love of neighbour.

We don't just get discipled and then that's it, finished. It's something we are for the rest of our lives and that takes commitment. In the wording of our baptism we are told that: "*Everyone who is baptised walks in that light (of Christ) for the rest of their lives.*" If discipleship is defined as "being a student" that means we are learning for the whole of our lives.

Think about it for a moment – what words come to you when you think about commitment? Write down just a word or two about what that brings to mind for you.

It's pretty clear what we are being told – we have to stay the course. Church, faith, learning is not just once a week. Can we really be fully developing as a Christian if we are not giving into the community in which we are living or working? Discipleship is not merely a one-way street – it has to be a reciprocal relationship. That is the key word - relationship. That can be hard if we are just hoping to come to church to receive – to be given to and not to give. If we stay in the state of only "receiving" then we stagnate – then we are not in relationship, we are only looking inwards.

And so we are encouraged to look outwards. Being a disciple is about learning and relearning our place in God's marvellous plan. It is about being willing to share, grow, move and be moved but always while staying in the Light of Christ. It can be really hard, especially if we feel that sometimes the people, the church, the teachings, the system may have let us down. But it is a relationship that continues as we are told. And relationships are messy. It is our choice to stay. It is our commitment to make.

In this chapter we are told discipleship is about looking and listening without interruption. If we are in that state then everything we do comes from that place where we are sitting at Jesus' feet, choosing to stay in his company.

To be a student of the teacher is to commit oneself to living in the same atmosphere, breathing the same air – that means we have to be there, we have to be very close. Not sometimes, but every time. In Hebrews 12 Paul says let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Again in 2 Timothy he talks about finishing the race, keeping the faith. It is an endurance, not a short sprint to the finish.

Disciples are people who desire to be changed. But into what? In our prayers we often ask us to be formed into the likeness of Christ. Forming is a process, it takes time for shaping and fashioning, maybe firing and drying, but we have to submit ourselves to that process completely and follow it through.

“The disciple is where he or she is in order to be changed; so that the way in which he or she sees and experiences the whole world changes.” Notice the present tense here. It is a constant state of being.

It is a constant state of listening and looking.

In order to pick up the clues we have to be aware.

In a society where the quick fix is touted to us everywhere we look, the idea of endurance racing is not an easy one to sign up to. We all want an answer, a solution, a one-time deal that sorts it all out. The fact that the disciples keep getting it wrong though gives me hope, great hope. If they can be so close to Jesus all that time, seeing first-hand his miracles and with ringside seats at his teachings how can they get it wrong so many times? Because like me, and you they are in process, in relationship with him. Learning and relearning.

Their misunderstandings are our misunderstandings, but then our learning and experience in and remaining in the faith also means that their moments of connection can be our moments of connection.

We are simply told:

“What matters for us now is that Jesus clearly requires awareness and expectancy of his disciples.”

But we are looking at it knowing what happens at Easter – we come with a different understanding, from the other side of Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

Try to imagine what it was like for the disciples not knowing what would happen. What do you think awareness and expectancy looked like to them?

Something to think about for the rest of the day: Where do we look for that awareness and expectancy now?

So as a disciple we are in relationship with God and with those around us. On page 9 Williams talks to us about our engagement as disciples and that our thinking should always be: what is Christ giving me through this person, this group? You may be thinking that today. But I would argue that our thoughts also need to be “what can I, as a disciple of Christ, be giving to this person?” Our discipleship needs to be outward looking, a shared experience, always in relationship.

One last thought - all of this is about movement – have you noticed that? Awareness requires us to be looking outwards, expectancy has a sense of growth, asking has a movement of breath. Following, travelling are all actions. We cannot stay still in discipleship. Our carrying the cross is a shared endeavour with Christ, our very being with the Master means we are moving with him as he moves.