

FOLLOWING JESUS TODAY

I often ask church leaders what the hardest thing is to figure out and get the answer: discipleship.

Discipleship is a great word, but it is an abstract one. What we mean, of course, is being a follower of Jesus. And this sounds more personal, bringing us right back to the start, on the shore of Lake Galilee. Jesus called people to walk with him. And we can see from the Gospels that the human race has never found that easy. Jesus said lots of hard things about following him. Implacable, uncompromising things that made many turn away.

Imagine you are driving and Google maps presents you with two options:

1. follow the three lane motorway which is narrowing to one lane with expected delays of two hours, or
2. a dual carriageway that is free-flowing

It takes your brain less than a microsecond to compute the better option. And a similar thing happens when people assess Jesus. He calls people to enter by the narrow gate, but queuing up for this is hard and time-consuming. So much easier to choose the wide gate.

Those who follow Jesus face this reality daily. Do I show patience in choosing the narrow gate today, or do I cheat just this once with the wide gate because it's convenient? No wonder people find it hard to follow Jesus consistently.

Every place and era has its own specificity, which impacts on those who follow Christ. It is a myth to believe we make our own way in life without the surrounding world influencing us. It's as realistic as expecting a fish not to get wet when it swims in the sea. So one of the first places to assess the difficulty of following Jesus faithfully is by looking at the culture. When we get a grasp of this, we learn how to counter or to co-opt its features. Today I'm going to address three, among so many others.

The first is the cult of cynicism. We are familiar with the new digital landscape. It provides us with impossible quantities of information every day. I have spoken before of the challenge this presents us with: how do we choose which information to pay attention to, in a way that helps us better to live as a follower of Jesus? I am not sure that many of us, me included, spend enough time working out what it means to follow Jesus when we go online. But I want to speak of a related and more insidious development.

In ways we cannot see or calculate, the online world is being flooded with manufactured news – lies - from sources we know nothing about. We don't know what is fabricated among the feeds we receive, because there is no way of authenticating the origins in a way we might have been able when the only way of receiving news was via the TV and newspaper. It is leading to a culture of mistrust

and cynicism where no-one believes anyone else and nothing is deemed important or worth acting upon anymore. And this induces passivity, where people believe meaningful change is impossible. As Hannah Arendt said: 'evil thrives on apathy and cannot survive without it'. This is the clear intention of those who create the lies that blight us. And there are real risks that our following of Jesus becomes passive and indolent, as we drink in the wider sense that nothing really matters anymore.

The second challenge to following Jesus is found in what sociologists call the spiral of silence. A German academic called Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has shown how people go along with majority opinion in order to fit in. The need to be part of the group is so deeply rooted in us that we can hardly bear to sound different to others. Noelle-Neumann identified only two types of people who overcome the pressure to be silent if their views are different to the majority. The first one she termed 'hardcore' – the person who feels so rejected by society that they no longer care what people think of them and retreat into an invented past. We see this in the political extremists forming in online hate forums like 8chan.

The second kind who overcomes the pressure to be silent is part of an 'avant-garde' – reformers who want people to listen to them despite setbacks because they see a better future that others don't. As Noelle-Neumann said: 'the chance to change or mould public opinion is reserved to those who are not afraid of being isolated'.

As the culture has turned away from the Christian faith, majority opinion has gone in another direction. The pressure for Christians not to share their faith in a better future – a world to come – is growing. When we share, we are more likely to feel isolated. Do we find sufficient comfort in God to speak up and break the spiral of silence over faith - or not?

The final trend is about selfishness. No-one can speak about selfishness without first having a hypocrisy scan of their own and I am aware of this. My point is that our culture is almost pathologically individualistic. No-one has a right to tell us how to live. We are free agents who can live how we want to, making of our lives what we wish. We are told it's all down to us, as if other people, and the circumstances of our lives, do not shape us. It's an insidious ideology because it allows so-called winners in life to say they won because they deserved it more than so-called losers in life, who have only themselves to blame. The Sinatra doctrine: I did it my way.

We are reluctant take direction from others and, in particular, no-one can enforce standards of morality on us. There are deep flaws in this position, because the choices we make often have a big impact on other people, yet we're encouraged to ignore this. In the life of the Church and the nation, it has led us to the peculiar position where the Church is constantly being criticised by people outside for no longer talks about standards in society but when it does, is quickly told to shut up.

A similar ethic seems to be found in the Church. We do not tell people how to live; we help them to think it through but are unlikely to correct any choices then made. And in way this is very biblical, because St Paul called on us to work out our own

salvation with fear and trembling. It's just that we have taken this to new levels in our me-centred world.

Something different seems to be happening in China. There, a remarkable surge in the life of the Church is being guided in part by discipleship mentoring where small groups of people get alongside one another to encourage faith in a process of accountability, where people openly share their lives with others. This sits well in a Confucian culture where the group is more important than any one person and people more readily receive direction from others. The culture is simply more collective and less individualistic than ours.

But what if we have something to learn from this?

This is why I am very excited by the possibilities raised in our own diocesan initiatives surrounding Life Together, the creation of small groups of followers of Jesus who are willing to be accountable to others in the group as they make this journey.

It is a striking counter to the idea that we must make our own way in life and it is also rooted in the Benedictine spirituality that informs the life of Malling Abbey and Rochester Cathedral. So, it is both radical and conservative. Radical, because small cells of accountable Christians are counter-cultural, and conservative, because it is drawing on historic streams of wisdom and practice.

There are three characteristics of each Life group: abiding, obeying and converting. The words of Jesus in John's Gospel about the priority of abiding in him so that we may bear fruit lies at the heart of this. If I can be facetious for a moment, Jesus calls everyone of us to be a remainer! People who abide in him and remain there. There are many distractions in our culture that can cause us to wander, but abiding in Christ in the structure of a small group is both possible and appealing.

To obey another is perhaps the most radically dissenting act we can do today. No-one believes in obedience anymore. It is thought to belong to a naïve and credulous world that we have abandoned. And yet, subversively, we look to practice it in the Church. Most of us never subject our obedience to the scrutiny of others, but in a Life group, the option is there. The group seeks to obey God together. But it can only do this by listening for the voice of God. This is not a passive engagement, like the skimming of online information we spoke of earlier, but an active listening, which seeks to interpret the will of God and then act on it. Life groups will be at their most radical when they take what they have learned into the world around them. To be the avant-garde that Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann spoke of – people who believe the world can be different and better. People of faith who believe their culture can be shaped in the character of God. People of conversion.

Benedict had a Rule which governed the life of the monastery, but he envisaged a large amount of autonomy for each monastic house – a space to work out their own salvation. In a similar way, each Life group has freedom to inhabit their space in a way that suits them. It is not directional. As we have seen, this does not work well

in our culture. Instead, faith and practice will evolve according to the personalities and circumstances involved. The only thing that matters are the virtues of abiding, obeying and converting.

Our culture is dismantling many of the boundaries that gave it shape over the years. We use fancy words and phrases like disruption and creative destruction to offer support to the project. It is believed no boundaries should inhibit us in either our private or our corporate lives. But as one philosopher said, what has no boundaries has no shape. Our culture is becoming shapeless and unformed, and this is not conducive to human flourishing. We need rules and we need boundaries, not so they constrain us, but so they free us. To be the people we should be in God, and to offer this gift to the culture around us.

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