

GREVILLEA

November, 2007

Welcome to the tenth edition of **Grevillea** an e-magazine to stimulate your thinking!

Why "Grevillea"? The Macquarie Dictionary defines "grevillea" as any shrub or tree of the very large, mainly Australian genus Grevillea family. Many are attractive ornamentals and a number are useful trees. It is also worth noting that grevillea can be very toxic.

So Grevillea is an Australian e-magazine which will cover a large range of subjects as time goes on. We trust they will be interesting (not just ornamental), useful and stimulate (not irritate) your thinking. We aim to have articles that will be short, practical and worth your opening them as attachments.

This edition focuses on **Discipleship**.

Making and growing disciples is a fundamental task for the church. The risen Jesus commissioned his followers to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). In this issue there are a range of perspectives on what discipleship means and ways to foster it. Chris Budden, currently minister at North Lake Macquarie, who spoke at the School of Discipleship held in Canberra in July, writes about radical practices for the Christian life. Geraldine Clarkson who is now at Picton but formerly was in Dubbo gives her personal reflections and experiences in discipleship. From the Upper Blue Mountains, Steve Aynsley tells of how he seeks to foster discipleship among his congregations. Anne McPherson who was the community minister at Bidwill in Mt Druitt and is a member of the Wellspring Community shares her thoughts on discipleship. Drawing on Mark's gospel, Rick Dacey from West Epping gives us his thoughts on discipleship. Finally, as we are entering the season of Advent, Janice Freeston offers an Australian worship resource for Advent.

Email me if you have some thoughts to share. My email address is chrisw@pnp.unitingchurch.org.au

I trust you will be encouraged by reading these articles.

Grace and peace

Chris Walker

Radical Practices of the Christian Life¹

Chris Budden

In this paper I want to explore the nature of discipleship in terms of some of the practices that might mark the Christian life, practices that seek to embody an alternative set of beliefs and values to those found in the community.

What are ‘practices’?

Dorothy C Bass says that to talk of practices is an attempt to think about the close relationship between doing and thinking. She says:

Christian practices are patterns of cooperative human activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ. Focusing on practices invites theological reflection on the ordinary, concrete activities of actual people – and on the knowledge of God that shapes, infuses, and arises from these activities.²

Christian practices arise in a world that has been created and continues to be sustained by a just, loving and merciful God.

Christian practices are the human activities in and through which people cooperate with God in addressing the needs of one another and creation.³

Practices hold together our actions and our thinking, arise from the life of communities, are capable of change and adaptation, draw on the wisdom of all people, and seek to weave a way through the dynamic of fall, sin, redemption and grace.

Practices are about holiness of life, sanctification, habit reversal, the change of passions, and the expression of what it means to be born again. It takes time to develop new habits, to allow them and new interactions to reconfigure our lives.

Sabbath Keeping

When Israel entered the Promised land she had in her memory the horrors of the brickyards of Egypt, with its harsh demands and 24/7 economy. She was to build a covenant community in the shadow of the urban economy and military life of the Canaanites.

The book of Exodus tells Israel that it is to keep the Sabbath as a day of rest for the whole community (Exodus 20: 8-11). Sabbath keeping had its foundation in the desire to build a community that could trust God and the abundance of God and that placed community and care of neighbour before economy. Sabbath keeping was a protest against the enslavement of 24/7 economies, and made provision for rest.

¹ This article is based on a series of three sessions which I led in July 2007 at the School of Discipleship in Canberra.

² Dorothy C Bass, ‘Introduction’ in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C Bass (eds) *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002) p. 3

³ Craig Dystra and Dorothy C Bass ‘A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices’ in Volf & Bass p. 22

Sabbath is way of breaking the cycle of commodity pressure, of production and work and buying, that must fill every moment with economy, and that sees others as threat and rival and competitor for the scarcity that must be fought over. Sabbath says: there is enough, there is a limit to what I need as a human being. What defines life is not commodity and work, but the neighbourliness made possible by Sabbath and idleness.

There is no way we can return in civil society to Sunday as it used to be. Indeed, given the legalism of much of what passed for Sabbath keeping, we probably do not want to go back there. Yet the church needs to recognise the importance of Sabbath for rest, worship, fellowship, a different sense of time, the limits of our work, and dependence on grace and the bounty of God. It is in our consumerist, shopping-mall driven culture an important statement about God and life.

Our lives and freedom

The life we live, the constant input we receive from the various media, the explanations given for political and social choices, are based on the assumption that the core of human life is that we are free individuals who create themselves through our own choices, made within the framework of a world dominated by economy.

The central narrative that underpins the modern world is the claim of freedom of the individual. The assumption of modernity is that human beings are not creatures who owe their lives to others, but those who create their own lives, values and meaning. As human beings we are said to live in a world of alternative values that jostle for our attention, none of which can claim any absolute value. All one has is a commitment, however passionate, to a particular set of values that have no foundation.

All our social practices are construed on the basis of freedom, self-creation, rights and consumerism. They are based on the assumption that as human beings we are responsible for our own lives and our own self-creation.

The Christian tradition says we are creatures, people whose being is discovered in God not made by us. There are three claims that shape us as creatures and shape the practices of the Christian life:

- i. We are created by God and not ourselves.
- ii. We are a creation of a God who acts providentially yet allows human freedom, a tension that is possible because we understand the world eschatologically (i.e. in terms of ends and purpose).
- iii. We are made in the image of God who is Trinity, and thus to be human is to be essentially communal and inter-related.

So what are the practices that seek to sustain the view that we are creatures, formed in the image a Trinitarian God, and nurtured by a story told and celebrated by the church? Let me suggest two.

First, there is the practice of nurturing the Christian community. God has entrusted us with the best story in the world. But, and this is a great affront to the ethos and story of freedom, it is not a story that we can discover for ourselves. The church knows the story of God because we have been told. We seek to be obedient to that word because we understand that, as creatures who are broken and disobedient and unable to grasp

the mystery of God, we need to be told what truth is. Our task is to give witness to this reality by humbly acknowledging that the truth we claim rests on confidence that God's word is true, not on our own discoveries.

Second, there is the practice of seeing life as vocation, as a pattern of life and work determined by God, as calling, as choices made in everyday life as a form of Christian spirituality. Vocation is faith engaged with the ordinary in ways that take seriously relationship and community. It is the way our gifts, abilities and passions find expression in everyday life.

Vocations are about one's place in a community, the structuring of one's life around a way of being and location that draws on the values and traditions of that community. Vocations are done to honour relationships. Vocation is a denial that everything is simply about me.

A community that can sustain truth and discipleship

In a world that people create for themselves, in a world where choice has become the central value, there are few truths. Everything is relative, except the claim that I am free. It should be a world of greater tolerance, but instead it is a world that needs to be controlled for the sake of economy.

I have suggested that what defines us is not freedom but creatureliness. I want now to suggest that creatures we are to sustain truth – God's truth.

The church, as the Body of Christ, is that community that is formed by the story of God in Christ. It is a community that understands that it is not simply part of the world and its story, but both it and the world are part of the story of God.

Stanley Hauerwas suggests that as the Christian church enacts its story in worship and virtuous life it learns to situate what the world claims are 'givens' – things which are meant to be the way the world is and can only be – within a larger narrative which is the story of God. It removes the world's struggles from the limits of a vision that is only about human ends and what is known now. It insists on an eschatological vision, a future that is about God and which rests in the hands of God.⁴

The heart of Christian community is the search for truth, the capacity to honestly face our own lives and acknowledge them, and the desire to hold to the truth of God. We should be able in the Church to struggle with each other over truth. Indeed, rather than decry conflict and struggle in the church, rather than building a false unity based on tolerance and, eventually, indifference, we should engage in a serious search for truth.

We are a community that needs to take the time to learn to speak truthfully to each other, a time that can only occur through forgiveness and patient trust in God. To speak truthfully is to acknowledge our lives as broken, and our past as containing both gift and violence. It is to avoid justifying the violence of the past, and carrying that violence into the future. For this, though, we need the skills to be forgiven.

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing The Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2004)

I want to suggest to you that the sort of community that can sustain the life Jesus calls us to is one that takes seriously its calling and election by God. We are not church, we are not the Body of Christ, by our own choice, but by God's call. We are a special part of the purposes of God, and this calling has at its heart an eschatological expectation, an ability to live by an end of history that is more than an extension of what is.

The Spirit gathers the church to the Father through Christ in order that his will be done on earth. The eschatological end of God – to bring all things under Christ (Eph 1: 10) - is realized in a partial way in time and space by the calling of the church⁵. That is, the universal and final purpose of God is achieved through specific and particular events and communities - Israel's election, the resurrection of Christ and the church.

One of the consequences of the church existing because of the call of God, and not because it is a voluntary association of free individuals, is that we are called to holiness. This holiness has two aspects. First, it is a holiness or sanctified life that is imputed to us by God. That is, God declares that we ARE holy. Second, it is a call for us to actively and concretely participate in the quest for blameless and holy living. It is seeking a new life in conformity to Christ.

That is, we are to be a distinct people – holy and set apart. We are also a people who engage with others in the quest for holiness, safe in the knowledge that our holiness rests in God.

We engage in the search for justice, but always being church and not adopting whatever we need to achieve an end. We are to be a community that is:

- peace-making, and anti-violence
- radically inclusive
- loving of enemies, and patiently able to turn the other cheek.

The church, as the elect people of God, as a people whose life rests in God, is to be a sign and foretaste of God's action for the world. Our first task as Church is to witness to God's reality in our words and practices; to say this is the life God intends, no matter how difficult to live out in this world.

Because the Christian story has, so to speak, already ended victoriously and definitively in Jesus, the church is free to bear witness, peaceably and patiently, to that ending.⁶

We engage in the search for justice, but always being church and not adopting whatever we need to achieve an end. This, I believe, provides a deep challenge to the way we practice church today, where our work and ministry is determined by what we see as the needs of the world rather than by our need to be church. We are to be an odd people called 'church'.

⁵ Colin Gunton, "Election and Ecclesiology in the Post-Constantinian Church" in Wallace M. Alston Jr and Michael Welker (ed) *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids, Mich/ Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003) p. 103

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing The Faith* p. 97

We need to develop habits of truth-telling, confession and forgiveness, and taking time to hear each other. This will allow us to hold within our church a sense of diversity, to embrace those who are different, and to model an openness to the way we keep relating and seeking truth. Out of the sense that truth is to be sought within a community of God's people, we model seeking and diversity, a patient waiting for truth to emerge rather than be forced to fit our pre-conceptions.

Christ calls us to be peace-makers, not because that is the most sensible or best way to achieve some earthly end, but because it is to be a sign to the world, a witness to the love and grace of God.

There is the need for us in Australia to be a church whose holiness is tied to justice for Indigenous people. We need to develop the practices that are those of a guest on another's land and home, that will truthfully name occupation as invasion, that owns the destruction of the last two hundred years, that seeks to build support and just relationships. It is to make this a central commitment of our concerns for justice, and not simply a peripheral issue alongside others.

Conclusion

The church seeks to embody the practices of a people who follow the ways of Christ, practices often at odds with our world. We are to engage with our world, but always as church and not to meet the agenda of the world. We are to live in ways that reflect our deepest beliefs and hopes.

DISCIPLESHIP - a personal perspective

Geraldine Clarkson

Who we are as disciples is unique to each and every one of us; therefore our discipleship becomes our faith journey.

When I read about the disciples in the bible and really take time to think, I often wonder if we really appreciate what they were being asked to do. Leave their families, give up all worldly goods, go into foreign and strange lands leaving behind everything familiar. Is Jesus asking these things of us today and if so how many of us would walk away from all we know in complete and utter faith?

Australia is populated with people of many backgrounds who have left their home land and families to come to a place which they believe will provide them with a better life. For some this would have been a choice taken with joy and anticipation but for others it would have been taken through necessity, fear and insecurity. Whatever the reasons, they may well experience feelings of isolation, apprehension, and some nostalgia for the life they had left behind. I am one of those people, coming to this country from Scotland in 1980 with my husband and two children, along with lots of hopes and dreams.

We settled very happily into our new life until 1988 when we had come to a crossroad in our lives and prayed for guidance. This resulted in my husband and I leaving our children, then aged 23 and 18yrs, in the family home and moving to Dubbo for three months, but it was 18 years before we returned.

It was in Dubbo that I became involved with an outreach mission in the west of the city. The mission was to support and empower the people of the area to take pride in themselves and their community, and share with them God's unconditional love. With the help of church volunteers we became involved in a play group and the breakfast programme in the local school. We set up a young mothers group which included sewing, cooking, parenting classes and had a hairdresser and beautician come to help them feel good about themselves. In 2001 we started a free sausage sizzle with funding we received from the Uniting Church 'Jumps for Youth' community project in 2000. This event took place every second Saturday for the next five years and through this, wonderful relationships and friendships were built.

I have always been interested in people but it is not always easy to be involved with people, especially those on the fringe of society who might require more than we are willing to give. We think that whatever their problems are, drugs, alcohol, abuse, poverty, there is someone out there more qualified than we are to deal with it, a government agency of some sort. There is a fear that if we get involved in their lives they may want to become involved in our lives. It is alright to do our Christian duty but we want to keep it separate to our real lives.

There was an Aboriginal lady who would come to me often covered in bruises, after being beaten by her drunken partner. I would listen to her story and wonder why she just didn't take the children and leave but she would insist he didn't mean to hurt her, he loved her, he just had too much to drink. I got to know her really well and even got to know her partner, who was a very gentle soul when sober, and they were really struggling to keep a roof over their heads and feed their children.

At this point you might be asking, if they had so little money how could he afford to drink? Well he couldn't, but he did it anyway because he could only see today, and it was hopeless. Poverty brings many problems, the main one being lack of hope, without hope we have no dreams. We dream that someday, somehow, something will change, without dreams we cannot hope for tomorrow. He could not see a future for himself or his family so it was easier to get lost in a drunken haze.

We talked often, shared meals, and got to know the family well, well enough to ask their permission to pray for them. Even those who say they do not believe in prayer are happy for you to pray for them, and the next step was to ask to pray with them. When we started praying together things started to change. The young man slowed down on the alcohol and managed to get some casual work, and when he was in full time work he stopped drinking. The children are now relaxed and happy and doing well in school and the lady is also working now as a teacher's aid.

I had a fear of this lady, her partner and their aggressive children but we can overcome our fear by developing a compassion for people and the compassion can grow into a relationship which is rewarding for both parties. Not all stories have happy endings but that is the challenge we face when we step out of our comfort zone and see people for who they are not what they are.

We face many of the same issues that Jesus' disciples faced 2000 years ago therefore it is important to take lessons from them to enable us to be better disciples today. I do not believe we are all asked to leave the security of family and friends to be faithful disciples,

but I do believe we need to be discerning about what we think should be done and what the Lord wants us to do.

I was asked once how I intended to introduce the Lord to the people of the community. I truly believe it was the other way around, I was following the Lord and he was introducing me to His people and asking me to carry out His instructions.

Discipling in the Blue Mountains

Steve Aynsley

Christian discipleship is rightly and readily described as following the way of Jesus. The issue for most of us in the church is: what *is* the way of Jesus? And how do we make that interpretive leap from Jesus' words and actions in the first century Middle East to our mainly urban lives in the twenty-first century?

I would suggest history has somehow taken us away from the radical nature of the way of Jesus. Bill Loader recently mused in one of his web-based "First Thoughts" on a passage in 2 Timothy:

"How could what began as good news for the broken hearted who cried out for change become the sedative for the comfortable? How could the way of the cross become a pathway for success and a sanction for protecting our own interests?"

Prof. Loader's questions point to the gap between the way of the historical Jesus and the practice of most of the church. A fundamental disconnect exists. We have largely understood a Christian life to mean a personalised devotional faith coupled with a conservative morality, expressed by being nice. But as Jesus scholars continually remind us, "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild doesn't get executed by the state."

(I'm also reminded of a friend who went to South America with a church program [About FACE??] many years ago. He commented on the irony of the Magnificat being performed in Western churches as a beautiful piece of choral music while poverty-stricken people in South America could be arrested for singing it because it was regarded as a song of revolution. Perhaps the South American experience is closer to the original Lukan context.)

So the path of Jesus – the path that we are called to follow as disciples – is one that sets us against the conventional wisdom and values of the day. As Marcus Borg highlights in "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time", Jesus was a sage who taught a subversive wisdom expressed in dramatic parables and sayings where the world gets turned upside down. Sinners are welcomed, the religious are suspect, outcasts are held up as examples of faith: little wonder we should count the cost before committing ourselves; little wonder it is described as taking up our cross. It is a dangerous path.

The other side to the historical Jesus seems to be his fresh understanding of God, to whom he was deeply connected. Jesus lived in a very intimate relationship with God and he became a vehicle for enabling others to experience the sacred. He didn't so much exhort his followers to believe in himself or even to "believe" in God, as much

as inviting others to be in the same sort of experiential relationship with God as he was.

Jesus re-imagined God for the people. God became more accessible for the crowds through Jesus' teaching – being found in, and likened to, a loving father, a gracious host, a searching woman and a caring shepherd. The ways of God were seen in lilies of the field, women kneading dough, growing bushes and many other images.

Christ's ministry therefore had at least two connected strands: (i) subversive teaching and actions that flowed from (ii) a deep connection to and love of God. Spiritual connectedness and prophetic social comment went hand in hand.

And I think this is the path of discipleship for us today: deeply connecting with the Spirit, and from that connection, engaging the world in our own context consistent with the values of the Kingdom of God.

In the church therefore I want to help people understand this historical Jesus and encounter his risen life. True discipleship will flow and grow from these twin emphases. The remainder of this paper identifies how we seek to do that in the linked congregations of Leura, Katoomba and Blackheath. While we don't have a formalised discipleship program, I believe our approach to many aspects of church life encourages a strong following of Christ.

Worship plays a role in discipleship because it is so central to our ongoing Christian formation. I plan services so that worship will nurture and encourage but also push understandings, ask questions and unsettle us with the claims of Christ. For example, when the lectionary reminded us, through 1 Timothy, to pray for kings and all in authority, I used the opportunity to reflect on how Christians might decide whom to vote for in the recently announced election. I suggested policies consistent with kingdom values and a concern for the least might be better criteria than finding the party that will promise us the most money in our pockets. Though Christians will differ on which party might do that better, because discipleship involves every area in life – in this case their voting responsibilities – I felt this was an appropriate response to the biblical text.

Christian service is a key part of discipleship and we participate in Christ's mission in a number of ways in the Mountains. Two high profile activities are the new Homework Network, an after school support for referred children, and the long-running Open Hearth weekly luncheon for the marginalised. Volunteers who participate in these services have the opportunity of reflecting God's love and concern for all in a non-judgemental atmosphere and practice Jesus' words of going to those in need.

These outreaches are supported by volunteers across all our congregations and so I seek to make links to those activities in sermons, thus encouraging theological reflection and assisting people connecting what they do in service to the Scriptures. Because we have a number of people who are very active in wider community activities such as refugee, indigenous and conservation groups, I also seek to highlight these in sermons or prayers to assist them celebrate these activities as part of their Christian discipleship.

Late last year the Elders of one congregation felt led to actively invite members to a greater commitment to Christ and the church. We decided on a **specific visitation program** where we visited in pairs, thanked people for their involvement and encouraged them in their gifts and commitments. It was done sensitively and wasn't about financial stewardship. It not only enabled deeper relationships but also helped many articulate their faith journey in a new way. It was also a growing time for those who visited as we took time beforehand for training and afterwards for debriefing.

In the middle of this year we ran some **leadership training**. Working with Presbytery staff we designed and led 3 evening sessions focussed on leadership among our young adults and teenagers. This encouraged reflection on their faith journey, the leadership tasks that they had been exercising and who they were as (emerging) leaders. I feel that this enabled those participants to consider more deeply their Christian walk of discipleship. Many of those involved had recently been confirmed and so it was an opportunity to build on that public commitment to Christ. One area that I haven't pursued very far is that of **mentoring** those leaders. I have done a little of this simply by taking individuals out for a coffee and talking about their faith walk, what issues and questions they have and any concerns in their area of responsibility.

The coffee shop-based **Mountain Journeys** is a group that falls under many headings in our church life, but one is certainly discipleship. In this group a mix of people from the church and those not regularly involved meet to discuss Christian faith using a variety of means. Books, current affairs and resources such as *Living the Questions* and *Saving Jesus* have helped the group reflect on Jesus' ministry and our mission from a theological progressive point of view. People have grown in their faith as many of their assumptions about Jesus have been challenged. A constant question is: how do the insights from these approaches impact on our expression of faith? Most of us discover an emphasis on the historical Jesus leads us to embrace a faith that highlights social justice, non-violence, a radical inclusion of all people, openness to other faiths and a broader spirituality.

Though we don't have many ongoing study groups, we do run **short-term studies** particularly around Lent and at other times. Some are regular Bible studies, some are focussed on Assembly or ecumenical materials (eg, on communion by NCC) and some are book-based (eg, 40 Days of Purpose).

Because I like to expose our people to a range of material, I also look for good **articles to share**. I make numerous copies available and place a notice in the Bulletin. I have found the one-page articles scattered through MediaCom's "Seasons of the Spirit" often to be useful. Recently I copied a provocative (to some) article challenging the exclusivity of Jesus as the only way to God. In the context of our multi-faith world it challenged the oft-held assumption that Christianity is the only true religion. The response was varied: one woman in her 60's who brings her grandchildren to church quietly said that those exclusive claims had always worried her and this was the first time she had heard an alternative way of viewing them. Because I had some feedback about other responses, I ran an informal gathering on a Sunday afternoon where people could voice their questions and I could flesh out some of the background to this way of thinking. It was a productive time as we wrestled with different approaches to faith and ultimately, discipleship.

These are just some of the ways we foster discipleship in the Upper Mountains. It's a great journey!

Discipleship - as a member of the Wellspring Community

Anne McPherson

My years of studying Latin (a long time ago) tell me that discipleship has something to do with learning, as does discipline. I think we often forget that now, with the more common understanding of discipleship as being a follower – usually a seriously committed follower. In Jesus' time people often had to follow their teacher in order to learn, and even now students may choose a particular university, especially for post-graduate studies, in order to learn from a particular professor. So for me discipleship is first and foremost about learning - being open to learning, life-long learning. I would be quite happy to have a permanent Jesus learner L-plate.

Learning directly from a teacher and if necessary following that teacher becomes more than abstract learning. It is an experience that will in due course make a difference to the way I live. So I can learn *about* Jesus and God, complete biblical and theological studies, without becoming a disciple – though not of course at any Uniting Church educational institution! When I think of the people who have influenced my Christian journey most, they are people from whom I have learned by example, people whose actions have spoken more strongly and more authentically than their words. I believe that being a disciple of Jesus, learning from his example, must make a difference to my value system and therefore to my life-style. It makes a difference in my attitude to money and possessions, to difference and to conflict, to political and legal authority, to the environment, to social mores, and to people who are on the edges of our society – people from foreign countries, speaking different languages or practising different religions, people with disabilities, with mental illness, people in jail, with drug addictions or unemployed, and families who are struggling with poverty, discrimination and disadvantage of any kind.

Though my primary relationship with God is through Jesus and the Spirit, I need to be in relationship with other flesh-and-blood human beings who are sharing this sometimes difficult path of learning and following. Christian community has always been important to me. Sometimes I have found this in my local congregation, but often it has meant joining with a more intentional community.

For many years this was Action for World Development, established in 1972 by the then Australian Council of Churches and the Catholic Bishops Conference, an ecumenical movement of people for peace and justice. In recent years Wellspring Community has been my primary community. Formed in 1992 by the Rev John Martin, this Community is inspired by the Iona Community. It is a dispersed ecumenical community of women and men, lay and ordained, who are seeking new ways of living the Gospel in Australia today. Members and Friends of the Community seek, corporately and individually, to:

- **be open to God** through prayer, meditation, Bible reading, study,

- listening to people's stories and listening to creation
- **respond to Christ** with regard to occupation, lifestyle, use of time and money, action for peace and justice, service and hospitality
- **live in the Spirit** building a community life, meeting together for worship and celebration, being accountable to and supporting each other on our journeys.

For Members of the Wellspring Community these become the spiritual, life and work, and corporate disciplines of the common Rule to which we are invited to commit ourselves each year. Though most of us would concede that we fall short at some of these, I personally find the attempt to be disciplined is an important part of my discipleship. In other words, it is another way of learning.

Wellspring Community aims to be **PROPHETIC**, addressing injustices in church and society, and **RECONCILING**, seeking understanding and harmony between different faiths, different Christian denominations, different groups in society, between humans and the environment, and between people and God. We recognise that **CHRIST IS CENTRAL** and deepening spirituality and evangelism are essential, and that **CHRIST IS IN THE WORLD** calling us to be involved in politics and economics, peace and justice and ecology.

The Community has currently identified the following areas of particular concern;

- **Spirituality and worship**
building on the Celtic Christian tradition and seeking to renew and deepen our spirituality, prayer and worship in the Australian context
- **Peace and justice**
seeking new ways of structuring society, politically, economically and socially, so that none are excluded, exploited or disadvantaged, and that differences are respected and conflicts managed without violence
- **Reconciliation**
between Indigenous and other Australians, learning to live and work in partnership and harmony
- **The environment**
seeking to discover and promote new ways of sustainable living as an expression of our caring for God's creation
- **Ecumenical and interfaith issues**
seeking to promote co-operation and sharing of truths, learning to live beside those of other faiths in trusting relationships.

The Community operates through regional and national gatherings, public workshops and local cell groups. These are facilitated by a National Council, State Contacts, Area of Concern Convenors and local cell groups. It publishes a bi-monthly newsletter '*Pipeline*' and an annual Prayer Diary.

What interested me about the Iona Community when I first heard about it in the 1950s was its very real attempt to bring together 'work and worship, prayer and politics, the sacred and the secular'. Wellspring Community has sought to follow this path, balancing in our own lives and in the life of the community both the activist and the contemplative expressions of our faith. This has inspired me, and helped me to grow spiritually and as a practitioner, even at times when I know I don't get the balance

right. But this inspiration does not come from a charismatic figure or from visiting a holy place. It is experienced in community.

Of course, it is challenging to live this way, but unfortunately there is often little challenge in our comfortable church communities. And the challenge is invariably accompanied by support and encouragement. When I was working in Bidwill, I was isolated from other Wellspring members, yet always felt strengthened by being part of the Community. The two fundamental dimensions of Wellspring Community which related directly to my work in Bidwill were firstly the challenge provided by the Community to live out as authentically as possible the incarnational theology which is at the heart of our commitment, and secondly the mutual support and encouragement that Members and Friends give to one another..

I do wrestle with Jesus' command in Matthew 28: 19 to 'make disciples of all nations' as it is usually interpreted as making them all Christian. When I look at Jesus' ministry he specifically called very few people to follow him. We know from his interpretation of the Isaiah passage that he understood his role as primarily to teach, to bring a message of hope and freedom, and to heal. His compassion was outstanding. He certainly healed many more than he called, and often commended them for their faith. A few followed him. However, Jesus prevented the Gerasene demoniac from following him, though he did give him a commission in his home town. Jesus certainly spoke to and taught great crowds of people, bringing them good news of the Kingdom, and he shared meals with social outcasts, giving them hope. No doubt the lives of many of these people were changed to different degrees and for different lengths of time. We know too that some would-be followers gave priority to other things in their lives, that Jesus warned of the cost of discipleship and that, as this became clear, many turned back, and that the rich ruler found the required discipline too hard. So Jesus did have a small band of disciples who travelled with him and who stayed together after his death, forming the nucleus of the first church, but there is no evidence that he attempted to make disciples, in this sense of the word, of all with whom he came into contact.

I think we are called to seek ways to offer everyone the opportunity to learn, to experience God and know Jesus and feel the Spirit. How people respond is between them and God. However, if they respond by seeking to follow Jesus and his ways, they will need supportive communities, communities of people who understand that we are not all called to the same forms of discipleship, but who will challenge new believers to grow in faith. And to me growing in faith inevitably means being open to God - through prayer, meditation, Bible reading, study, listening to people's stories and listening to creation; responding to Christ - with regard to occupation, lifestyle, action for peace and justice, service and hospitality; and living in the Spirit - building a community life, meeting together for worship and celebration, being accountable to and supporting each other on our journeys.

Discipleship and Mark's Gospel

Rick Dacey

I have a tough time with discipleship. Hearing Christ's call amidst the din and clamour of our culture is hard enough. My own human frailty and brokenness makes living into that call even harder.

What's worse, Christ doesn't call me to live as an isolated individual disciple. Christ's call comes to me in and through community. My call is bound up with *our* call, the call of the whole church. We disciples are all in the same boat. And with us in that boat are all our fears and anxieties, doubts and conflicts.

Sometimes it seems that church amounts to one colossal exercise in pooling our collective frailty and brokenness.

Perhaps that's why Mark's Gospel has a special place in my heart. The struggles of faithful discipleship are woven throughout the New Testament. But there's something about Mark's concrete immediacy that brings this theme home for me.

I love reading about the disciples' missteps, misunderstandings, and sometimes comic fumbling in Mark. As a community of believers they're always getting it wrong. The community of the Twelve (and I suspect, the Marcan community as well) are forever missing Jesus' point, getting bogged down in foolish squabbles, falling down in discipleship, and running in fear. As one who frequently gets it wrong, I find it comforting to know that I and my community are in such good company.

A good example of this is the motif of bread in Mark. It crops up in some unexpected places, as when Jesus walks on water (6:45-52). Jesus has sent the disciples out in the boat to go to the other side. He sees that the wind is against them and they're straining at the oars, so he walks out to them to offer some encouragement. Mark tells us that he intended to simply walk past them. He's not out there to show off his miracle-working power. He's just passing by with a message: *You'll be right, mates. Don't worry. Remember I sent you on this mission. I told you to get in the boat and go over to the other side. When I call you to do something, trust me, you can do it. I'll see you through. I know that the wind's against you, but it can't stop you from doing what I've called you to do. Come on, follow me, I'll lead the way.*

That's an interpretive paraphrase, of course, but if that's Jesus' message it's clear that the disciples don't get it. They see Jesus walking on the water and they're terrified. So Jesus gets into the boat and gives them the message in plain language: "Come on now, Take heart, it's me. Don't be afraid."

And they still don't get it. They're stunned. And Mark tells us precisely why they're stunned. It's because they don't understand about the loaves (v. 52).

Ah, the loaves, of course. Now it all makes sense. Loaves?! What does Jesus walking on water have to do with loaves? It seems like a really odd thing to say, like a bizarre non sequitur, unless we read Mark's Gospel all the way through.

When we read the whole Gospel it's clear that bread represents both God's presence and God's provision. And the disciples are constantly worried that they don't have enough bread. They hear what Jesus is calling them to do, but they're always worried that God won't provide them with what they need to do it.

Right before this episode where Jesus sends them off in the boat on their mission to the other side, Jesus calls the disciples to feed 5,000 people with 5 loaves of bread and a couple of fish. They hear what Jesus is calling them to do. They hear him say, “You give them something to eat.” But they know that that’s just not practical. In fact, it’s physically impossible. They don’t have enough to do what Jesus is calling them to do.

They’re not ready to glimpse the world as God sees it. They’re stuck in the world as they see it. And in the world as they see it, if there’s not enough, there’s not enough. Common sense. It doesn’t matter what Jesus is calling us to. If we don’t have enough, we can’t do it.

Sure, Jesus is calling us to feed all these people. But if we don’t have enough, we don’t have enough. Yes, Jesus is calling us to care for others with committed compassion. But if we don’t have enough, we don’t have enough. Of course Jesus is calling us to grow together in our discipleship. We hear Jesus calling us to advocate for justice, to bring healing to the broken, hope to the hopeless, love to the loveless. But we don’t have enough to go around! We see our resources: five loaves and two fish. And we know, that’s not enough.

But Jesus has a teaching, a message for all us disciples. He takes the five loaves and two fish, gives thanks, breaks them up, then gives them to the disciples to give to the people. “You give them something to eat.” Next thing you know the disciples are carrying up baskets full of leftovers.

But when they were out there in that boat, straining against the oars, the message about the loaves was lost on them.

Later on in the narrative, Mark tells us that Jesus is teaching another crowd, 4,000 this time out in the desert, and he has compassion on them and prepares to feed them (8:1-10ff). But again, the disciples don’t understand about the loaves. They say to him: “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?” I can almost hear Jesus sigh as he runs the lesson again. Once again the disciples feed the crowd, this time with seven loaves and a few fish. And again there are baskets full of leftovers.

As we read through Mark, this bread thing starts to get comedic. The poor disciples just don’t get it about the loaves. Right after the disciples feed the 4,000, Jesus has one of his run-ins with the Pharisees. Then he and the disciples get into the boat again. As soon as they shove off, the disciples realize they’ve forgotten something they need for their journey: bread. They don’t have enough: just have one old loaf in the boat. They’re sailing along and Jesus is warning them about the Pharisees. “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees,” he says. “And beware of the yeast of Herod.”

And the poor disciples, they’re so concerned that they won’t have enough bread, that they can’t hear what Jesus is talking about. They hear him say “yeast,” and—I love this—they say to one another, “*It is because we have no bread!*”

In a wonderful moment of exasperation, Jesus responds to their fear:

And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?"

They said to him, "Twelve."

"And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?"

And they said to him, "Seven."

Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:17-21)

I can hear Jesus standing up and saying this in a church council meeting, or in a congregational budget meeting, or in a hand-wringing gathering of the wider church: "Do you not yet understand?"

*Do you really believe I would send you on a mission and then not provide you with what you'll need to live out that mission? When the wind is against you and you're straining at the oars, and you see me walking alongside you, are you still afraid? Do you not yet dare to understand about the loaves? Are you not yet ready to risk letting go of the world as you see it? Will you not yet trust that my promise is **enough**?*

I do find it comforting that the struggles of first disciples have such a familiar ring to them. What I find more comforting still is Jesus' response to his disciples' frailty and brokenness. While he often gets frustrated with them, even to the point of exasperation, he never gives up on them. He keeps loving them.

And what is even more remarkable, *he keeps counting on them*. Following his Passion (not the disciples' finest hour), the risen Christ arranges a meeting with broken band of frightened followers (Mark 16:6-7). Frustratingly, Mark doesn't tell us how that meeting turned out—or even how that message of hope got through amidst the community's fear. But evidently the message did get through. And that message continues to call and send us today.

Of course Mark's Gospel doesn't have a proper conclusion. It leaves us hanging in mid-sentence. Attempts have been made to round it out and tidy it up (see the shorter and longer endings).

But I like it the way it is. Unfinished. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ (1:1). Like the church. The story of a frail and broken community of disciples called, sent, and equipped with everything we need to . . .

An Australian Advent Worship Resource

Janice Freeston

Advent Candle Liturgy

(Each week a new colour will be added to the “leaves” coming out of the foot of the cross on the front wall. The colours of the “leaves” match the candle for the day.)

Advent #1 - Peace: (Brownish red candle) – stone bridge or small hill of stones (cairn)

Banner: “Advent – For you O Lord my soul in stillness waits”

Isaiah 2:1-5

Peace is encountered when walls are dismantled and bridges are built. The time will come when people will put down their weapons of war and take up instruments of peace. God promises peace among nations and in our hearts and so we light this candle as a symbol of peace. We pray for peace on earth, for a time when people will no longer choose violence or aggression to solve disputes. We wait in anticipation for the peace, which passes all understanding.

We are a people of peace.

Advent #2 - Hope: (Forest Green candle) Wheat, green branches in a vase

Banner: “Hope has come”

Isaiah 11:1-10

Hope is the new shoot on the gum tree after the bush fire, the new grass in the paddocks after the rain. God promises to come to us and so we light this candle as a symbol of hope. We hope in a time of righteousness and equity, a time when all of creation, the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, people from the east and the west, north and the south will live in harmony. We wait in hope for the coming of Jesus Christ who gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

We are a people of hope.

Advent #3 - Joy: (Burnt Orange candle) – Sand and water (maybe a water feature)

Banner: “Immanuel – God with us”

Isaiah 35:1-10

Joy is found in the shade of a tree on a hot and dusty plain. Joy is found in the laugh of a kookaburra or the joey peeking out of it’s mother’s pouch. Joy comes wherever God’s presence is celebrated and so we light this candle as a symbol of joy. The birth of Jesus gave great joy to his family and friends and through Him there is everlasting joy on earth. We wait with the joy of the Lord, which gives us strength.

We are a people of joy.

Advent #4 - Love: (Red earth candle) – Red earth in bowl

Banner: “God so loved”

Matthew 1:18-25

Love is seen in the lives of those who give of themselves to help others. Love is found wherever people take a stand against injustice and prejudice. We light this candle as a symbol of love. God so loved the world that he sent his son to save us from sin. The love of God is perfect and casts out all fear. We long for this love, which conquers all and never ends.

We are a people of love.

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