

HELPERS IN GOD'S KINGDOM

Wanted – workers for the Kingdom. Jesus didn't put up a sign; instead he walked the shores of Galilee and called busy people to drop what they were doing and follow him. By the end of chapter one of St Mark's Gospel, Jesus was such a hit that he couldn't walk openly into towns. By the start of chapter three, some people are plotting to kill him. These two facts - his incredible appeal to many and his threat to some – explain the need for disciples. There was a great hunger for the Kingdom, and yet the King was to die.

Disciple means 'learner' and apostle means 'missionary'. After his resurrection and just before his ascension, Jesus gave his disciples their final commission: to go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel. The disciples would always be disciples, but now they had become apostles.

Call of the disciples 1:16.20

'Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people.' At once they left their nets and went with him. (1: 17-18)

Influential rabbis would gradually attract their followers. Jesus doesn't hang around; he chooses his followers. Perhaps this gets across the urgency of his mission. Furthermore, Jesus doesn't call religious experts, but humble fishermen. After all, he said he would teach them. He chose people with potential, not finished products.

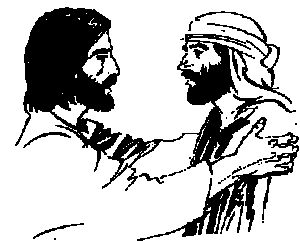
Jesus calls Peter, James, John and Andrew and they leave behind their old lives and follow him at once. What do they see in Jesus to make this radical step? The mystery is partly answered in the next passages where the authority of Jesus' teaching deeply impresses the crowds whilst a word from him drives out a demon.



Choosing of the Twelve 3:13-19

'I have chosen you to be with me ... I will also send you out to preach, and you will have authority to drive out demons' (3: 14-15)

Jesus chose twelve out of a much larger group of followers. Israel of old was founded on twelve tribes; the new Israel is founded on Christ and the twelve he commissions to preach and heal. The choice of the Twelve comes after a passage in which the large crowds force Jesus into a boat so as to avoid being crushed. His ministry requires more ministers.



When the Gospels list the Twelve, Simon 'Peter' (Rock) is put first, Judas the betrayer last. However, Judas was not chosen to play the role of betrayer; like all the others, he had potential as a disciple. Their time with Jesus was meant to turn them into apostles.

The ministry of exorcism - 'driving out demons' – was vital for early Christians. Though all sickness was a sign of the 'reign of evil and death', possessions were more vivid signs of Satan's grip. So naturally the advance of God's Kingdom on earth would mean the retreat of Satan's kingdom.

Mission or the Twelve 6:7.13

'Don't take anything with you on your journey except a stick - no bread, no beggar's bag, no money in your pockets. Wear sandals, but don't carry an extra shirt.' (6:8-9)

Jesus' instructions seem like madness – until you realise they're very sensible. Why take extra stuff that will slow you down, cause you worry and make you a soft target for thieves? Jesus does allow them a stick to speed them on the rocky roads and ward off any snapping dogs and snakes.

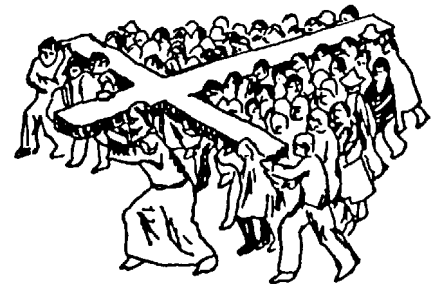
In sending them out with these instructions, Jesus is also encouraging childlike dependence on God. Through the generosity of the villagers, God will provide for them.

As indicated in 3: 13-19, the ministry of the Twelve will be preaching and healing; they are given authority over evil spirits, an authority coming from Jesus himself.

Cost of discipleship 8:34-38

'If anyone wants to come with me,' he told them, 'he must forget self, carry his cross and follow me.' (8:34)

This challenging passage comes after Peter's recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus is absolutely clear on the fate of the Messiah. A true disciple follows Jesus along the way of the cross. *'Forget self'* seems to mean 'remove yourself from the centre of your universe'. Painful, but necessary.



The saying: *'whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it'* must have meant much to the early Christians. The Greek used to mean 'life' can also mean 'self'. This would allow the passage not only to mean physical death but also loss of one's old ambitions and priorities for the sake of the Gospel.

Rewards of Discipleship 10:28-31

'I tell you that anyone who leaves home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and for the gospel, will receive much more ...and in the age to come he will receive eternal life.' (10:29-30)

Earlier, Jesus told a 'mini-parable': *the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given – and more besides* (cf. 4:24). This seems to apply here. The sacrifices made for the gospel come back as blessings in abundance.

Jesus is not so much preaching abandonment of earthly ties and responsibilities, rather detachment from them so as to put the gospel first.

How did ordinary people dress?

Ordinary people went barefoot or in sandals. Men wore a long, cotton shirt, usually belted and with a cloak over it. At prayer they covered their head with a prayer shawl, called a 'tallith'. Underneath it they wore a skullcap, still the headwear of the Jews today. Jewish women wore similar dress, but their long robe was usually embroidered, and instead of the tallith they wore a veil.

Peter's promise and denial 14:26-31, 66-72

Jesus said to Peter, 'I tell you that before the cock crows twice tonight, you will say three times that you do not know me.' (14:30)

Rash in his promise, complete in his denial of Jesus, it is no wonder Peter breaks down and cries upon remembering Jesus' words.

Jesus gave Simon the name 'Peter', or rock, (cf. 3: 16). His choice didn't change, in spite of Peter's frailties. At the resurrection, the angel brings Jesus' message for the disciples – Peter gets a special mention.



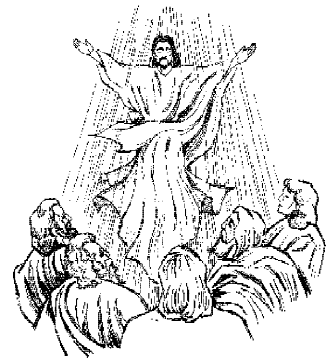
The Final Commission 16: 14-18

'Go throughout the whole world and preach the gospel to the whole human race.' (16:16)

The earliest manuscripts of St Mark's Gospel end at 16:8. The remainder (16:9-20) may not have been written by Mark although it is old enough.

The Eleven are told to proclaim the gospel to *all peoples*, showing that the old boundaries of Judaism have been breached. Salvation and condemnation depend on belief and unbelief respectively.

Those sent by Christ are given *authority*; but this is an authority that *serves* rather than 'lords it over' people. This authority is not earned, it is given; it does not belong to the apostles in themselves, but comes from Christ.



Discipleship and Leadership: for Christians today

The basic demands and experiences of being a disciple apply today. There is the same invitation, the same cost, similar failures, and the same final hope.

Invitation - Christians are all still called to preach the good news today and to be missionaries to others by word and deed.

The cost of discipleship – this remains the same: giving up of life. The old priorities must be set aside; the Christian must place Christ and his gospel foremost in their lives. Of course, Christians today do not often face the stark challenge of the persecuted Christians of Rome. Nonetheless, Christians are to expect difficulties in the living out of a truly Christian life, for example resisting the materialistic culture, with its emphasis on self-seeking.

Failures - in Peter Christians recognise the continuous struggle between wanting to live up to the high calling of discipleship and succumbing to human frailty. Like Peter, the Christian must not despair even in their worst failures, but instead turn to Christ for healing and a fresh start.

Final hope - Christians today share the same hope of the early Christians: of rising to new life with Christ.

Most Christians also recognise *authority* in the Church. For example, Catholic Christians look to their bishops and priests for guidance about the Christian life. They believe that the bishops are successors of the apostles and that the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, inherits Peter's role of being shepherd of the Church on earth.

Activities

- 1 For each of the following, write a sentence or two of explanation.
- the meaning of disciple
 - the meaning of apostle
 - the significance of 12
 - the meaning of 'Peter'
 - the 'cost' of discipleship
 - the rewards of discipleship
 - two ways to understand 'lose your life for me and the gospel'
 - the Final Commission

- 2 Some of the things Jesus said to the disciples are listed in the box beside.

- i) Choose any **three** sayings. After reading them in context, try to explain what the words meant to the disciples.
- ii) Try to explain what the words might mean to a Christian today.

Follow me (1:17)
 Come away with me to some lonely place (6:31)
 Forget self (8:34)
 Take up your cross (8:34)
 Be a servant (10:44)
 Be on your guard (13:33)
 Stay with me (14:32)
 Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel (16:16)

- 3 St Mark's Gospel gives the Twelve pretty bad press. Yet eleven of them were sent out to be leaders of the early Church.

Some might argue that Mark should have highlighted the 'good points' of the Twelve— if only to make them more respected later as leaders of the Church.

Write a detailed argument *against* this view.

DISCIPLES STUPID AND SLOW TO LEARN

BIG-HEADED BROTHERS

DISCIPLES ABANDON THEIR LEADER

THE 'ROCK'S' SHATTERING DENIALS

DISCIPLES REFUSE TO BELIEVE IN RESURRECTION

- 4 It is impossible for Christians today to live a life of true discipleship.

For ...

the materialistic, 'me first' culture prevents people from having a spirit of self-sacrifice

people are already too stressed out with the usual commitments without taking on the extra commitments of discipleship

how can you be 'childlike' in a world that even encourages children to grow up too quickly?

people are suspicious of going to extremes – especially in religion

most people have heard of Christ and we have the welfare state to look after people in difficulty – is there still a need for disciples?

Against ...

the conditions Jesus set for entry into the Kingdom and being a disciple were meant for everyone to reach

discipleship has always been difficult – but never impossible

we can take Jesus' spirit of love, service and self-sacrifice to all we do – discipleship is not meant to be divorced from ordinary life

if we rely on Jesus rather than on ourselves, there is nothing we cannot do

some people – like priests and missionaries – still make radical commitments for the Gospel