

Lay discipleship myth or reality?

Sermon preached by Terry Drummond at the Lunchtime Eucharist at St Martin in the Fields on 21 November 2001 and afterwards the basis for discussion at the Industrial Christian Fellowship AGM

The word became flesh and lived among us *John 1;14*

In these words of St. John, often associated with the reading of the gospel at Christmas we have the central truth of the Christian faith. In the incarnation of Jesus we find the fundamental truth and principle that is the basis of both our faith and call to discipleship. The issue for all Christians is to work out the implications of the call for their own lives and ministry.

It is my premise that in the words from St. John we find the basis of Christian discipleship. If we are true to their implications, we find ourselves both lay and ordained involved in the creation of an alternative culture to that of the society we all inhabit. If this is the case the radical nature of the call to discipleship needs further consideration and reevaluation.

It is all too easy for the call to Christian faith to be seen as an individual response and therefore a private activity. A natural outcome will be to take a part in worship and to join a congregation for worship. It is important to set worship within the context of the 'the great commission' given to the disciples at the end of the gospel of St. Matthew 'to go out into the world, and call all nations to discipleship.

The sending out of the disciple's points us towards a partnership with one another and with God who is a partnership of the three parts that make up the Trinity. It is in this image that I believe we find the theological underpinning of our task, to be disciples and to be at work in the world.

The Church all too easily falls into the trap of seeing ministry as being professional, so that to be active in the name of the institution we must be ordained or at the very least be officially authorised. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of losing sight of the original commission that is given at baptism and is affirmed in confirmation or its equivalent.

Equally the fact that all Christians are equal before God, is an important factor that needs constant reiteration, we start as lay people and even with the authority of holy orders remain at heart called to the ministry of all believers. A priesthood that belongs to the whole people of God, though a few will be given the specific authority of the Church to a special ministry that is represented in ordination or commissioning to a specific ministry.

It is important to be aware that some Clergy and laity seek to hide behind the authority that is associated with ordination. The privatisation of faith is reflected in those clergy who believe they are called only to serve the worshiping community. In these congregations the privatisation is reflected in the belief that its weekly contribution is to offer God the worship that is both right and proper, without losing sight that this is a beginning not an end!

In this situation some clergy and worshiping communities may hide behind the need to keep the show on the road, forgetting that the show is for a God who became incarnate and conducted his ministry in the market place and wider community.

A God who in the three parts that are in constant interaction are able to offer pointers to the fundamental truth that they are out there in the world not hiding in the safety of the church building. It is actually through the worship and most especially the Eucharist we are all being continually re-commissioned to discipleship and being returned to the world to live out our faith.

The ministry of all Christians is both to offer worship and service in the wider community that is our home and workplace. The challenge is for all who have a call to faith to work out the meaning of what faith and then to minister in the places we find ourselves as God's servants and disciples.

The working out of these matters is an activity that should be shared within the worshipping community. Clergy and laity together must find an opportunity to share their understanding of what God is calling them to both as individuals and as a community of faith.

The response of the active disciple, who works outside of the institutional Church, both lay and ordained must be to better understand the world they are part of. Perhaps not being overtly Christian in the work place but living out a life of prayer and reflection and always being open to all those with whom we come into contact.

The disciple, who is called to a ministry within the institution, must also be open to the world that it inhabits, reaching out to those who are outside of the worshipping community. Seeking to understand the issues and the joys that are the day-to-day reality of those who work alongside people who are not always accepting of those who profess religious faith.

The root of all of the above is to recognise that like Jesus, we are called to service. The words of St. John return us to first principles; 'The word became flesh and lived among us.' We are all called to follow in the footsteps of the incarnate lord worshipping the Trinity who in the interaction of three parts show us that partnership and shared activity is the root of our call to faith.

The original title for this paper was 'lay discipleship – myth or reality? I hope through the above, I have shown the truth that lay discipleship is not only a reality it is a gift of the whole people of God for both the institutional Church and more importantly the whole world.

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