

1. How to Grow in Faith

This week, I bought a new book. It's called '*Becoming*' and is Michelle Obama's memoir on being the First Lady of the United States. I've always liked Michelle Obama – she's made some great speeches supporting women – and her book has been positively reviewed.

I've not got very far (it only arrived on Thursday) but was instantly drawn to her words on page one. She talks about growing up in Chicago in a close knit family and says, 'I used to tell people that when I grew up, I was going to be a paediatrician. Why? Because I loved being around little kids and I quickly learned that it was a pleasing answer for adults to hear. *'Oh, a doctor!'* they would say, *'what a good choice.'* I now realise, she says, that it's one of the most useless questions an adult can ask a child – *'What do you want to be when you grow up?'* As if growing up is finite. As if at some point you become something and that's the end.'

And so it is with our journey of faith. We talk about growing in faith but, this side of heaven, is there ever a point where we're all grown up with no-where else to go, nothing else to learn about God? That we've arrived? *I don't think there is.*

In our gospel reading today, Jesus spells out the cost of being a disciple. But what actually *is* a disciple? When we look at the first disciples of Jesus, we see that their call to discipleship was a call to be *with* Jesus. *'Come, follow me,'* he says, and they leave their professions, their homes, their families, and go. Jesus' call to discipleship was a call to be *with* him, a call to be *in relationship* with him, a relationship that will gradually make us all that God intended us to be.

In my early years of being a Christian, when older Christians spoke about their relationship with Jesus, of hearing him speak to them through his word and through prayer, of seeking his will, *I'll let you into a secret - I thought them a bit weird.* I was happy to bring the children to church, I enjoyed the music, I helped out at the children's groups and I found the talks interesting. But this personal relationship stuff. No, no, no, I didn't get that for a long time. As I looked around me, I gained the impression that just as there were other divisions in which a football team can play, so there were different leagues of Christians. There were people like me, happy then to be in League Two, whereas there were clearly people around me who were in the Championship,

if you only count clergy as being in the Premiership! They seemed to have their faith sorted: they knew all the answers to any question the Vicar might ask in a sermon, were always there at prayer meetings and *even* prayed out loud. And, to my complete embarrassment, sang at the top of their voices and raised their hands in worship! What were they thinking! And, not content with just worshipping on a Sunday, they'd go off to Spring Harvest every Easter for even more Bible teaching and worship.

But of course, as time went on, and I matured, both as a human being and as a Christian, I realised that the life of discipleship is *not* the special life; it's the *ordinary* Christian life, the life that *every* Christian should be living. Life as God intended it to be, a call to relationship of the highest priority. And that's what Jesus is getting at in those strong words to the multitude of people following him on that day recorded by Luke. He doesn't want people to follow him willy-nilly, not knowing what it is they're following. To make this point, he uses the analogy of building. You wouldn't plan to build a new house without first sitting down and working out the cost. You'd need to know you had enough money to complete the build before you started digging the foundations. '*So, in relation to following me*', Jesus says, '*take it seriously. Be prepared and be committed. Give this relationship the priority it deserves.*' But just like those early disciples, other things get in the way and we fail to give the time that is needed to develop and grow our faith. We can get a bit jaded, a bit despondent, a bit worn down by the pressures of life. And our faith can feel a bit lukewarm.

So, how do we turn things around? How *do* we grow in faith? Let's talk about manure for a few moments. We'll be in good company as in one of his parables, Jesus spoke about manure. Truly he did! In Luke 13 – the Parable of the Fig Tree – Jesus tells a story of a man who had a fig tree in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit but didn't find any. So he said to the gardener, '*Look here! I've been coming to this fig tree for three years hoping to find some fruit, and I haven't found any! Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?*' But the gardener has an idea and seems to care for this fig tree. '*I'll tell you what, Master*'. He says. '*Let it alone for just this one year more. I'll dig all round it and put on some manure. Then, if it fruits next year, well and good; and if not, you can cut it down.*' I imagine the gardener saying these words with a twinkle in his eye, knowing the infinite power of good manure.

So, if we want to grow in faith, from whatever starting point any of us might be at – if you think you're in League 2, League 1, Championship or Premiership, or even non-league – what does manure look like for us? What is it that will help us grow in faith?

Well, the first thing is simply turning up! Another great book I've read recently, commended to me by another Christian on the journey from this church, is Rowan Williams' book *'Being Disciples'*. It's short – you can read it in one sitting, and it's concise and clear. He says that discipleship – growing in faith – means first and foremost the *'simple willingness to be consistently in Christ's company'*. What that means practically is *'seeking constantly the company of other servants of Christ, the company of the revelation of Christ in Scripture, and the company of the Father, the Son, in the Spirit, in prayer'*. That's a bit wordy, so let's look at each of these in turn.

1. Seeking constantly the company of other servants of Christ.

It is very hard to be a follower of Jesus on your own. All of us benefit from the support and encouragement of others. So coming to church regularly, and worshipping with others, will help you grow in faith. All of the most recent research from the Church of England says that 'irregular' or 'monthly' is the new 'regular', but it's very hard to benefit from a sermon series, or to form relationships with people, if you don't come very often. That's not to say that I don't understand or appreciate the busy lives that so many of us are leading, with busy jobs, running a home, looking after dependants, be those our children or elderly relatives. But, if you are around on a Sunday morning, then please, can I urge you to do your best to come, as not only will *you* benefit, but *others* will benefit from you being here.

Similarly, if you're part of a small group. Do your best to get there. Many a time when my children were little and I'd get home from work, cook tea, put the children's things away, the thought of then going out to home group was rarely that attractive. But I *did* go, and I never regretted it as I always came away with more than if I'd stayed at home.

So, wherever you are on your faith journey, ask yourself the question: do I spend enough time in the company of other servants of Christ? Many of you will, I'm sure. But some of you won't see another member of the church family from this Sunday to next. Is God calling you to do something different this year in relation to fellowship with others? Believe me, there's so much to gain.

2. Seeking the company of the revelation of Christ in scripture.

In short, reading your Bible and other Christian literature. There's a great post on social media that says, *'Complaining about a silent God while your Bible is closed, is like complaining about not getting texts when your phone is turned off.'* But, if you're not used to opening and reading your Bible, where do you start? Can I suggest that you don't start with Genesis and work your way through the difficult, lengthy books of the Old Testament! When I first started reading the Bible, for many years I relied heavily on daily Bible notes bought from the Christian bookshop or online. I now use the Church of England app called Reflections, which gives a daily commentary on one of the lectionary Bible passages. It's short and to the point, focussing my thoughts, and gives me pointers for prayer too. There are so many resources available to help us engage deeper with God's word, and of course, we have each other. Reading Luke's gospel through on New Year's Day was an amazing experience, through which we all learned something new. So, is there something more you can do to hear God speaking through his Word revealed in scripture?

3. Seeking the company of the Father, the Son, in the Spirit in prayer.

To hear what God is saying to us requires a degree of stillness – stillness of body as well as of mind or heart. *'Be still, and know,'* says the psalmist. Be still and know – because I begin to know who God is, who I am, what the world is, when what one poet called *'the storms of self'* have calmed down a little bit. It's sometimes been said that the real problem in prayer is not the absence of God, but the absence of us. It's not that God isn't there; it's nine times out of ten that we are not. We're all over the place, entertaining memories, writing lists in our heads, thinking about the next thing we must do. God is simply there in unending patience, saying to us, *'So, when are you actually going to arrive? When are you going to sit and be still and listen and be present?'* But, to do that, you need to create some space. If you're not used to praying, you could start with something simple such as the words of the Jesus Prayer spoken over and over again: *'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'* Or the Lord's Prayer. Or these great words from a book called *'Before Amen'* by Max Lucado: *'Father, you are good. I need help. Heal me and forgive me. They need help. Thank you. In Jesus' name, amen.'* Once you know these words, you can then expand on them. Or, if you're a seasoned pray-er, there are lots of great resources, such as those on contemplative prayer, to take you deeper into the company of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Wherever we are in how we pray, there is always more to experience.

So, to conclude, what does growing in faith entail? As St Teresa of Avila, the 16th century Carmelite nun and theologian, once famously said: It's about enabling you to do some very ordinary things a little bit better, in a way suffused by the love of God. As disciples, we are simply learners. So, let's see if, over this next year, we can both learn and grow together.

Amen.