

MARK 3:13-19  
DISCIPLES TOGETHER

How do I use the word ordinary without making it sound like an insult? The meaning of the word 'ordinary' is "no special or distinctive features; normal; commonplace or standard". I was in discussion about church when a friend of mine used the phrase "ordinary people" about his church and a couple stormed out of the discussion claiming that he had insulted them and the people of the church generally! Yet, one of the biggest compliments I've ever been paid was in the first year of ministry when a member of my church said to me: "You're just normal!" I'm not sure what she expected me to be as a minister, but "normal" is pretty good. *Ordinary People* was a movie released in 1980, one of the first directed by Robert Redford. The trailer says: "In this typical town, in this comfortable home, three ordinary people are about to live an extraordinary story"; the film describes family tensions, a story that happens to so many people and families, with attitudes that so many people show; the whole premise of the film is that stories like this happen to ordinary people in typical towns and in comfortable homes. When we use the phrase "ordinary people" it is not meant as an insult, but to identify us as people like any other people!

We are all unique! That is true in almost every way. Physically, we are unique: no two of us looks the same; even seemingly identical twins have small things that make them different; we have different hair colour and style, different eye colour, we are a different size and shape; everything is different and this makes us unique physically. Emotionally, no two of us will react to the same events in exactly the same way: some of us will be laid back about circumstances that will make others of us anxious beyond belief. Spiritually, we all have different stories of faith and our relationship with God is shaped by so many factors and experiences, each one different. The beauty of the church is that God takes all of these unique individuals, ordinary people and makes us live together as family; He makes us worship together, learn together, serve together, be disciples together. Today's challenge is to see how this collection of ordinary, unique individuals that we call church, can be disciples together!

*"Jesus went..." (Mark 3:13ff)* Here are twelve unique individuals chosen by Jesus to be with Him and that He might make them mission people. Some of them were brothers; some were fishermen, small-business men, partners in the business in Capernaum that might have had a branch office in Jerusalem. Matthew was a tax-collector and we saw what that meant two weeks ago, as an outcast. James and John are brothers with a temperament described as 'thunderly!' Peter had the capacity for putting his foot in it. Philip was so slow to grasp what was going on about him! Thomas only saw the black side of things. Andrew was a missionary, a one-to-one person, who brought Peter to Jesus. The other Simon was a nationalist, with strong political views that maybe shaped the way he saw the world and Jesus. Then there's Judas Iscariot, who would go on to betray Jesus, but here is a genuine call to be a disciple, and he was the doomed man because he chose it to be that way! They are quite a collection! Do you see yourself in that group, anywhere?

Jesus chose these twelve very different individuals to be His group, to be together with Him. Did they know each other beforehand? Some were brothers, others were business partners, some lived in the same town, but when Jesus called the twelve to be together, this might well have been the first time they all met! "Who are these people? What's your name?" Did they have some kind of introduction session? "Let's go round the circle, tell us your name and one interesting thing about you?" If you have some kind of an idea that because Jesus was there, they got on fantastically well together, you'd be wrong. They fell out at times; there was a rivalry that came to the surface about which of them was the greatest; they blundered and made

mistakes - and they did all of that *together!* There was no place to hide from one another; this is a group of people who are disciples in relationship with Jesus; but they are disciples in relationship with Jesus *and* with one another. No doubt, they learned from one another and criticised one another, but they also learned to love and serve one another and work together.

Let me give you an example: in early days of the Church in Acts 4, Peter and John are working together; how many things can you spot about them here? "*When they...*" (Acts 4:13f) They have healed a beggar at the temple gate and the authorities have arrested them for that and for preaching in the name of Jesus, teaching the good news about the resurrection. They don't have a background in theology and law, and the authorities recognise that, but they also recognise that these men had been with Jesus and the Spirit gives them courage to speak about Jesus and to stand up for their new Christian faith. The Spirit gives them courage, but do they take courage also from one another and from standing together? They took courage not only because of the two of them together, but because the others are standing with them, partners in the gospel, praying for one another, caring for one another, sharing together in all kinds of ways. They are disciples together in the gospel; how good is that!

When Jesus called the twelve to be His disciples, that call had two parts to it. First of all, they are called "*that they...*" (Mark 3:14) The disciples went everywhere with Jesus; wherever Jesus went, they went too; whatever Jesus did, they watched Him do it; whatever He said, they heard, and they did all of this together. It was a group experience! As they walked, they talked about what they had seen and heard; they asked questions – "did you understand that parable?"; they discussed it; they even argued about things. There's something about a group doing this together that makes it a different kind of experience. At work, have you ever done a group bonding exercise? You work as a team and it's meant to make the team stronger; you learn things about one another. Have you been on a group trip? You get to ask your questions, but you also get to listen to other people's questions and talk about your group reactions to what you've seen, to the places you've visited! It is a different kind of experience than if do it on your own. Discipleship was a group experience; these are not twelve individuals on their own with Jesus, but twelve individuals with Jesus, together!

Secondly, they are called to mission. "*That he...*" (Mark 3:14f) In the disciples' case that mission was quite specific, to preach and to drive out demons. If we'd been reading this in Matthew's version, then straightaway they are sent out into the villages to do that mission and they are given all kinds of instructions as to how they are to do it. They go out in pairs: this is mission done together, taking it in turns to do the speaking? They go, supporting one another; praying together; travelling together, eating together, sharing a place to stay. Then when they've finished reporting back together, for days, weeks, months, they are remembering together what it was like; it was a shared experience, a bonding time for the disciples, remembering together their unique shared experience, doing something together in the mission of Jesus. They spent three years together with Jesus: how much must they have learned about Jesus in that time? How much did they learn by seeing, watching, listening? How much did they learn about themselves? Did James and John to curb thundery temperament? John is later described as "the apostle of love!" How much did they learn about one another in that process?

Paul in his prayer for the Christians in Philippi writes about "partnership": "*In all...*" (Philippians 1:4f) Partnership is about him and the church and that they are partners in the gospel. Paul is giving them encouragement; they provide for Paul by sending

him money. His prayer in the letter, in part, is about growing their sense of partnership, growing in love for one another. The Church is a partnership, or a family, or whatever other picture you want to use. We are in this together, whether we like it or not. We are unique individuals whom Jesus has called and chosen to be His followers and He has placed us together in this church family and we are in this together. We are all unique: we are physically different from each other, we are different emotionally – some see the black side, some are unfailingly positive; we have different stories of faith and different experiences of life; we are all unique, but we are church together in this place and we have to make this work together. We are partners in the gospel; we are family.

We express that sense of being disciples together in the way we do church life. We worship God together: we can worship on our own as individuals, but there is something different about the experience of worship with a hundred other people singing the same song together. We can pray on our own and there is a quality to that kind of prayer, but there is a different quality about praying together, saying 'Amen' to someone else's prayer, saying that 'we support you and stand with you in your need'. We can read the Bible on our own and again there is a quality to that, sitting reflecting on Bible in our quiet space; but there is a different quality in reading the Bible together, asking questions of the text together, listening to other people's struggles in trying to understand or gaining insight from someone else. We can do things on our own in the service of Jesus and the Church, but there something of great value in being part of a team, working together, standing shoulder to shoulder with someone else, sharing that experience, as something that binds us together. "Networks of communication; a learning culture where questions are encouraged, a climate of trust and mutual support, allowing the freedom to make mistakes" (Hirsch p233) Does that sound like church? This is what church should be: we should be disciples together, spending time with Jesus together and doing mission with Jesus together.

Imagine: you walk along the beach and find some highly polished stones that reflect the water and the light; catch them in just the right light they just burst with reflection! How did these stones get to be like that? They don't come ready made like that! They start off as broken bits of stone, broken off a huge rock, angular, jaggy, broken off by the force of the sea. Then the sea goes to work on them and bashes them about, but that only moves them; it doesn't polish them. Then they begin to rub off one another, stones rubbing together under the power of the sea and as they rub together something begins to happen to them. The rough bits get slowly worn down, the stones become more and more round instead of angular and jaggy. The more and more they rub together, the more polished they become and they're not finished yet. No matter how polished they seem now, they are still a work in progress.

Being disciples together – the Spirit is at work in us, and He polishes us and shapes us to be more and more like Jesus as we listen to the Bible, as we pray and as we relate to one another. We learn to be humble by our relationships with others; we learn what it means to serve by our relationships with others; we learn what love is by our relationships with others; we learn all sorts of qualities by being disciples in relationship together that we could never learn on our own or from a book, even the Bible. This is not about meetings and attending meetings; this is about being together and deepening our relationships. The challenge for us is to be disciples together: get to know people in church; get to know the names of people you've not met before; learn to pray together, have courage to read the Bible together, be part of a team. Are we disciples together?