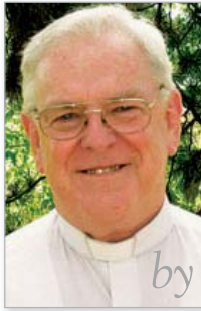


Many Admire Jesus – but Few Become Disciples



Bishop David Walker
Bishop for Broken Bay

“Jesus does not want admirers, but disciples. These words of Soren Kierkegaard have been the source of some interesting insights about discipleship. They point to the fact that to be a person who admires or respects Jesus is not necessarily to be a disciple.

Jesus is respected by many religious communities, even non-Christian ones, and even by those who have no religious affiliation at all. However, that does not make these admirers disciples. As Catholics we are called to discipleship, but some can go no further than being admirers. Attending a lecture does not necessarily make one a student and going to church does not necessarily make one a disciple.

Many admire Jesus but few become his disciples.

Admirers lack the irrevocable commitment and surrender that is characteristic of disciples. Their

respect and admiration is genuine, but it does not necessarily call forth that dedicated response to the love of Jesus that is the characteristic of the disciple.

It is perhaps like two young people who have begun to go out together, but who have not yet developed the love that will draw them together in the life long commitment of marriage. Jesus is not just to be looked on, but imitated and followed. His call is for discipleship, and only discipleship is the appropriate response to that call. Nicodemus in the Gospel came to see Jesus by night: this was not the action of a disciple. The rich young man in the Gospel greatly respected Jesus, but could not accept the call to discipleship.

Discipleship demands a far greater personal transformation than admiration. One can admire from afar, in a way that calls for little personal transformation. This is not discipleship. Continuing, radical change is necessary for disciples. One must transform oneself in a way that enables one to live up to the demands made by Jesus. This transformation is necessary to be able to carry one's cross daily, i.e. to bring to one's daily life that attitude of trust and confidence that Jesus manifested in his death. The disciple is ready to pay the cost: to do what is necessary to fulfil the responsibilities associated with discipleship. The disciple is expected

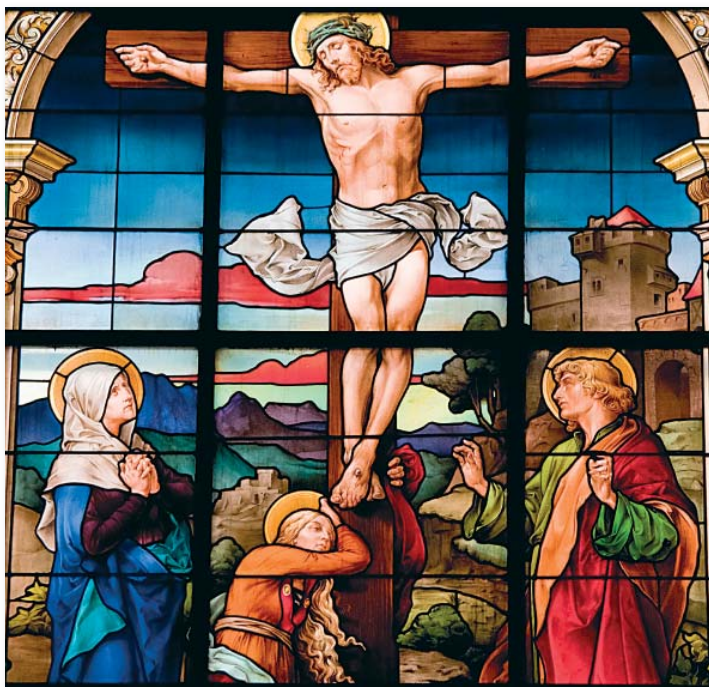
to bear fruit, drawing life from the vine who is Jesus. One author puts it well when he says Admirers talk the talk; disciples walk the walk.

Origen, one of the Fathers of the Church, says: “Christian life is being on the way and under canvas.” He was applying to Christian life the exodus journey of the Israelites. The point of the saying is that just as they pitched their tents each night and then moved on, we believers should continually journey. The danger is that we can become comfortable and remain in our comfort zone rather than continuing to journey. Being ‘on the way’ is characteristic of the disciple. The disciple has a relationship with Jesus that calls for constant attention. If it does not do that, it can die. Mutual admiration is not enough to sustain married life: the partners must work to let their love grow. Otherwise it can die. Admirers may transfer their admiration to another: the disciple is irrevocably committed to Jesus.

Many of Jesus' admirers see him simply as a great figure of the past. The disciple sees Jesus as one who lives now, who is alive, a person with whom one has a present relationship. This is how Jesus is seen through the eyes of faith, and faith is the characteristic of the disciple. The disciple meets Jesus in the ordinary events of life, and knows that Jesus comes in a variety of different guises in our daily life e.g. the hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, sick, and prisoner. Life is not just admiration of Jesus; it is active response to Jesus as he is encountered in the events of life. Seeing with the eyes of faith, the disciple is recognising and responding to Jesus constantly in life.

It is easy to deceive ourselves that we are disciples when really we are simply admirers of Jesus. A good test is that being an admirer often keeps us in our comfort zone, being a disciple makes us break out from it. Discomfort is more characteristic of being a disciple because it demands a relationship that is always growing around the other person, Jesus. Being comfortable often means that the relationship takes us as the point of reference.

I hope these reflections will challenge you to ask: “Am I an admirer, or a disciple?”



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