

Prof David Ford, Discipleship Central (London, 22 July 2022)

Those 20 years spent on the commentary [The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary] have been one of the most extraordinary times in my life. And the amazing thing for me was that every re-reading of John seems to bring more, and there were more and more surprises. Chapters I thought I knew in advance had surprises, as one got into it. And I came at the end, actually, to think that the purpose of a commentary like that is really to try to turn everyone into habitual re-readers of the Gospel of John, so that you too have the same sort of experience of the sheer abundance. 'From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace upon grace upon grace.'

But what I've been asked to talk about is really, what wisdom can we in twenty-first-century Britain learn about discipleship from the Gospel of John? And I want to connect that question with the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John. Think of it, these are the first words that the Word of God gives in the Gospel of John. And they are also a question, and it's what he asked his first two disciples. So this is the question at the root of their discipleship. Disciple, of course, simply means learner, and good learning depends, as Jesus well knew on good questions, generative questions, deep questions, the sort of questions that ideally lead you further and further into the truth, into reality, into who you are, and can accompany you all through life. And this first foundational question of Jesus to his disciples is that sort of question. I think it's worth asking this question to ourselves daily, maybe even more than once. And what is the question?

Jesus' question is, What are you looking for?

What are you searching for? What do you really, really want?

What do you hope to find and experience?

What do you desire?

The Greek is just two words, 'ti zeteite' – that's my Irish Greek pronunciation.

And that verb 'zetein' is a strong word. It runs all through John's Gospel, along with words with similar sorts of meaning – seeking, searching, wanting, desiring. And that is central to the Gospel.

And then, as now, life can be understood as a drama of desire. Desire goes to the heart of discipleship because, of course, that's where our hearts are set. And it also goes to the heart of a worthwhile life and of the Common Good that we were talking about this morning, in the prayer breakfast.

And Jesus says, 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.' He wants abundant life for all. I remember when we were working on the Vision for Education for the Church of England, which was published eventually as *Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good*, an engagement with a headteacher whose school had her '10.10' ethos, John 10.10, life in all its abundance, come to give life in all its fulness. And I visited the school and my goodness, it was built around being a sign of abundant life for all.

And Jesus demonstrated this, of course, too, he did signs of abundant life – all that wine at the wedding in Cana, for everyone there, not just for his own disciples. You know, all the feeding of the 5,000, all those healings, and of course, all that teaching, the meaning, the truth, the purpose, the making deep sense of life.

And at that great festival of Sukkoth, tabernacles or booths in Jerusalem, which centred on harvest and water, in other words, life, and on light, Jesus cries out to all the crowd, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.'

Jesus is about desire. And a huge amount of our personal lives and our culture is about desire. Life is full of choices, decisions, hopes, fears, things we want and things we don't want. The need to prioritise this activity over that or this relationship over that, possibilities for joining this or that group or movement and orienting our lives in one direction or another. It goes on and on. There's never been, I think, a culture in history more saturated by so many stimuli to desire through so many media.

Click on this. Vote for this.

Buy this, eat this. Drink this.

Like this. Watch this.

Read this, learn this, believe this, protest against this. Visit this, imitate this, be like this, follow this person and so on.

They're all about desire, aren't they?

The people and organisations that are most successful in stimulating our desires are among the wealthiest and most powerful in the world. And, of course, our desires can go wonderfully well or disastrously wrong and everything in between as well.

So Jesus asks, 'What are you looking for?'

Now if we jump – I'm assuming, by the way, that all of you have read the Gospel of John at some point – if we jump to John chapter 20 near the end of the Gospel, Jesus asks that core question about desire again, only now with an important difference. In perhaps the most moving scene in the whole Gospel, when the crucified and resurrected Jesus meets with Mary Magdalene outside his tomb – Mary Magdalene, remember, had seen him die – she is weeping as she searches for the dead body of Jesus. And she imagines him, of course, to be the gardener. One of the most wonderful commentaries on John that I've had was Margaret Daly-Denton's commentary, entitled *Supposing him to be the Gardener*. It's the Earth Bible Commentary about creation and so forth as well.

But Mary meets Jesus anonymously, and one of his questions to her is not 'What are you looking for?' – his question to his first disciples – but 'Who are you looking for?' So she's been looking for a dead 'what' and she finds a living 'who'. So the fulfillment of her desire is this person, Jesus, and her living ongoing permanent relationship of mutual understanding, trust and love with him.

The 'who' question is always utterly central in John's Gospel. All those 'I am's'. He is the fulfillment of her desire.

Now, what's at the heart of this ongoing relationship? John's Gospel uniquely gives what you might call a course in discipleship, in chapters 13 to 17, those which are often called the farewell discourses of Jesus on the night before his death.

And discipleship – I came to the conclusion, after 20 years – you would say, 'Why does it take you 20 years to get there?' – but that really what it's about is, we learn, we love and we pray. We have to be learners, lovers and pray-ers. That's what discipleship is about. And there's wave after wave. John teaches in waves, wave after wave of teaching on these in John 13 to 17. And what is said is both very accessible to beginners and at the same time continually challenging to the more experienced. I've been more and more challenged by John's Gospel as those 20 years went on. But it's a Gospel you can put into the hand of somebody new to the faith or just interested.

And so if you look at those three, we are promised the Holy Spirit, to lead us into all the truth. So there's no end to our learning as disciples, no end to it, it goes on and on and on. All the truth.

We are called to be friends of Jesus and told to love as he has loved, to live lives of inspired love and service. And of course, there's no end to that either. The super-abundance of this life of being loved and loving is infinite because God is love.

The archetypal disciple in John's Gospel, to whom the writing of the Gospel is ascribed, is simply called the disciple whom Jesus loved. And I think he's anonymous because we're all meant to share in that core identity of being loved and loving. So that's the love. And then there's prayer. We're invited to pray in remarkable ways, in the farewell discourses, confidently, daringly, and above all, in the name of Jesus. Now, what does that mean?

I think it means that it's to be in line with who Jesus is and what he desires. So we have to get to know him better and better if we want to pray, that's what we're called into.

And prayer, I think, is the depth of the other two. It's the depth of the learning and the depth of the loving. And there is, of course, no end to prayer, to worship, to praise. To use John's favourite word, 'glorify'. Glorifying God, glory. This is a Gospel of glory (I wish we had several hours!).

Now, all of this, the truth and learning, the loving, the praying, the glorifying, culminate in what I have come to consider the most important, most profound and most inspiring chapter in the Bible – the prayer of Jesus in John 17.

And in those 20 years, I mean, I came back to this again and again and again and felt that this is the core depth in the Gospel of John, and is summed up somehow by Jesus in this most intimate relationship, the key relationship of his life with his Father, and then shared with his disciples.

And what it gives is the final, ultimate desire of Jesus as he prepares to lay down his life in love.

Now how does that happen in the prayer? Again one wishes for several hours, but first he opens up the intensity of divine glory and eternal life.

Glorifying, glory, come five times in the first five verses. Next, Jesus prays to his Father for his disciples, leading up to the essence of their discipleship as learners. He says, 'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.' And he also then leads into them having a mission of love like he does: 'As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.' And later, of course, those words are taken up in chapter 20, when the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples, breathes the Holy Spirit into them, and says, 'As the Father sent me, so I send you.'

I love that. What that does is, it sends you back to re-read the whole Gospel endlessly, because you need to know how Jesus was sent and who Jesus is and so forth, and go deeper and deeper and deeper into that. But it also leads you forward, the 'as'. You're not to do exactly the same as Jesus. You're not in first-century Palestine. You've to endlessly improvise, in the Spirit, in our world, daringly, imaginatively, lovingly, etc.

That's where we're sent from there. But to get back to John 17, we then read in the last seven verses the extraordinary climax. Jesus prays for all of us who have come after.

Listen to it.

'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me, through their word that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me.'

'As' and 'in' are two of the deepest theological words in John's Gospel. You never come to the end of them, 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me, I have given them so that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'

'Father, I desire.' 'Thelo' – that's the Greek word there, 'thelo' – 'I desire that those also whom you have given me may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you have loved me before the foundation of the world.' This is the deepest love at the heart of our universe. 'Righteous Father, the world does not know you. But I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.' What a desire. What an invitation to discipleship, to live with Jesus, a life whose overwhelming desire is for this unity in love with God and with each other for the sake of the world God loves.

And that, of course, includes the whole of creation. Have I run out of my time, or do I have time for a footnote? OK, OK. Just one further thought.

One of my great experiences in 2009, about halfway through the writing of this, was, I read through the whole of John's Gospel. Richard Bauckham, one of my favourite New Testament scholars in this country, and Richard Hayes, my favourite North American New

Testament scholar, were in Cambridge, Richard, retiring from St Andrew's, Richard Hayes on sabbatical. And I invited them to read the whole of John with me. And we put 21 dates of three hours each between July and Christmas, and it was absolutely wonderful.

And they're both very different New Testament scholars, both deeply in faith and also really theologically engage in contemporary things.

So it was a wonderful, wonderful experience, but whenever they agreed about something, I thought they must be right. And when they when they came to John 17, they both agreed.

This is a sort of improvisation on the Lord's Prayer. It's a midrash was the word they used, the Jewish term for that, a midrash on the Lord's Prayer.

And it just changed the way I pray the Lord's Prayer. I'm sure many of you pray the Lord's Prayer at least once daily, as I do. And this has really changed, so look, the practical suggestion for letting this prayer be really part of your lives is, pray the Lord's Prayer in the light of John 17. And of course, remember that little bit of Greek that I've been teaching you that when it says 'your will be done', the word 'will' in Greek is 'thelema', which also means desire.

So in other words, it changes the feel somehow to say your will, your desire to be done. You know, of course it is his will, but is also his desire. And the desire draws us in to this extraordinary journey, life, of discipleship. Thank you.