

COUNTING THE COST

We were walking down the badly rocket-damaged road of the war-torn city where we had lived for the past six years when we were approached by three local men. After we had exchanged the customary lengthy greetings, one of the men, Abdullah*, announced to us: "I have decided! I have not gone back! I will never turn back from my faith in Jesus Christ!"

This was a bold declaration indeed, considering we were in a country where it is illegal to convert from the majority religion, under the penalty of death. Those who do convert usually practise their new faith in secret... they are not in the habit of declaring their conversion on a public street to expat Christians! But Abdullah, a government official, had spent years searching, watching, listening, reading, studying and praying, and, after counting the cost, had decided to become a fully committed disciple of Jesus.

What is Discipleship?

Jesus chose, in His last recorded discussion with His disciples, to give them the clearest of all instructions: "Go and make

disciples" Matthew 28:19. This was His ultimate challenge to each one of them, from the very first time they responded to His call through to the time He delivered His final instructions.

Discipleship is much more than an intellectual assent of God's existence or even a statement of belief about God. Discipleship involves the ordering of our lives in ways that embody Christ's ministry to our families and to local, national and international individuals and communities.

In answering one of the many tricky questions posed by religious leaders, Jesus defined discipleship this way: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind ... Love your neighbour as yourself" Matthew 22:37-38 (see the full passage in Matthew 22:34-40, also Mark 12:28-34 and Luke 10:25-28). Discipleship is about loving God. It is a deep desire that becomes one's lifelong motivation to be a totally devoted follower, head-over-heels-in-love with, and in adoration of, Jesus Christ.

As we read the Gospels we find Jesus constantly teaching and challenging His followers to create space to know God, to be one with God and to worship God. He emphasised that the evidence of this would be clearly seen by others in the way in which we love and care for people. When the going gets hard and huge personal sacrifice may be required, Jesus speaks to us from John 15:12-17: "I command you to love each other in the same way that I love you ... the greatest

love is shown when people lay down their lives for their friends.”

We later learnt that Abdullah, in addition to growing in his personal relationship with God, was boldly telling his family and a small group of friends about his newly discovered faith. He had also become involved in a project where, with no financial remuneration, he was helping others. He had realised that loving God and loving your neighbour are two sides of the same coin. You cannot do one without the other.

The Process of Discipleship

Before reaching a conscious decision to become a follower of Jesus, Abdullah had been searching for a deeper meaning to life. He had faithfully followed the practices of the dominant religion of his country, but as an educated person he had wrestled with the unanswered intellectual questions it had raised. He had also heard about other faiths and had done some research on them.

Through his work involvement Abdullah met several expatriates who were leaders in an aid organisation that focussed on medical and other capacity-building activities. He became increasingly impressed by the quality of their work and the genuine kindness and commitment of the expatriates, who, he realised, could be living and working in much safer, more comfortable and much more lucrative settings in their home countries. As he got to know them, he could see that there was sincerity about their understanding of,

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and relationship with, God, which influenced the way in which they interacted with and served the local people.

Throughout these many months of searching, Abdullah met regularly with a Christian who journeyed with him, studied the Bible with him and prayed with him. He also had to take into account the cost he would pay for becoming a follower of Christ in such a hostile environment, where others had been severely punished, tortured and, in some cases, killed. But eventually Abdullah responded to the Holy Spirit's prompting, accepted Christ's forgiveness, and became a fully committed follower of Jesus.

The Cost of Discipleship

Just two months after Abdullah talked with us on the street and publicly declared his conversion to Christianity, we received the following message: “We have very sad news to share with you. Our mutual friend is dead. He was killed yesterday. It was not an accident.”

Tears of sorrow flowed in our office. As with many aspects of our faith journey, discipleship that results in great loss and,



in some cases, untimely death, raises huge questions, the answers to which we may not fully understand this side of eternity.

Jesus was always clear, though, that true discipleship requires personal sacrifice: “If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me” (see Luke 9:23-27). Are we prepared to be fully committed disciples of Christ, like Abdullah? Can we truly declare, along with him: “I have decided! I have not gone back! I will never turn back from my faith in Jesus Christ”? ☞

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* Name has been changed