

# ON THE *d*ISCIPLESHIP JOURNEY



***“Make sure you go to the Starbucks on the fourth floor of the mall,” my contact said over the phone. “The Starbucks on the first floor is too busy for us to have a meeting.”***

I recognised him right away. An Iranian tends to stand out in a Bangkok Starbucks.

We had set up our meeting because he was pastoring a small Iranian congregation at one of Bangkok’s international churches. I wanted to talk to him about the kinds of training materials he used for discipling new believers because I have an interest in supporting the process among similar people in my land of service.

“When I meet an Iranian here in Bangkok, even before they show any interest in spiritual things, I begin the discipling process,” he said. “Becoming a follower of Jesus is a journey that begins long before a conscious decision is made. Our job is to help our new friends find the path.”

I took a sip of my caramel macchiato and thought about what my new friend had said. We in the West often look at something like the process of discipleship and break it up into parts. This helps us analyse the process. And then, sometimes, we become specialised in one of the stages of the process, quoting from Paul that some plant, some water, some harvest. But I see that Paul is simply pointing out that, in a disciple’s life, different Christians will have been used by God along the way to help the disciple find the right path.

Our Asian friends live in a more integrated world. As I think about it now, years after that cup of coffee, I see their wisdom. Now back in the Persian-speaking world, I am involved in a number of learning activities with adults. We support activities that range from literacy training for illiterate women to leadership training for elite professionals. Every time we engage with someone in their learning, we have

an opportunity to help them find a path, a way towards both truth and the Truth.

This week a former English student came to see me and asked if we could meet for a time to talk about something other than English. So we sat down – yes, over a cup of coffee – and he asked, “Have you ever had to face a difficult problem in life? How did you solve it?”

This opened the way for me to talk about the importance of my faith.

These classic discipleship questions came from him without any prompting from me. But this was not our first deep conversation. He had often stayed after class to talk when he was my student. We have been on a journey together, and for my part he has been in my prayers. In a way I am attempting to apply what my Iranian brother shared with me years before. I cannot say, at the moment, where these conversations will lead, but already I can see that he has been taking some of my previous advice to heart and is applying it in his life.

I think that approaching discipleship as journeying with someone is helpful. It is not hard for me to think in terms of discipleship as a pilgrimage, as I work in a land where so many long to be able to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca at some point in their lives. However, we in the west are used to ticking the boxes in our educational and professional development. School? Done. Uni? Done. Job? Sorted. With that mind-set we think that A is followed by B, which is followed by C.

But real life journeys rarely go like that. Yes, we can and should make a plan; it is important to recognise that we are heading for a goal. However, sometimes the detours and side trips we take along the way prove to be of immeasurable value in growing us deeper in God. Who plans for cancer, or an inconvenient accident, or a relational meltdown? Yet these experiences are the laboratory of life – a place where we can learn to grow, or to walk beside others as they grow, in following our Lord.

An African tribe has the tradition that whenever they strike their foot against a stone in the path, they stop and address their stumbling block.

“What trouble did you keep me from?” they ask the rock.

Do we talk to those rocks in our paths? Do we stop to reflect, to learn, and to grow? Or do they present themselves as annoyances to be quickly passed over and forgotten, not part of our plan?

As we learn to disciple

and to be discipled ‘on the way’, we too can learn to take life’s joys and sorrows as part of God’s discipleship curriculum. We can take up discipleship as a journey, thinking less about ticking the boxes and more about going on our own pilgrimage. And as we do, let’s remember that the best moments on that journey will come not when we’re watching the clock but when we’re enjoying a cuppa with a friend. ☺

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