

Follow me!

*A letter about discipleship by
bishop Åke Bonnier, Skara.*





Dear parishioners

Here is my annual letter from me to you. This time I want to write about discipleship. Because that is exactly what our lives are about and challenge us to.

My belief is that even before you were born, you were seen by God. The words of Psalm 139 remind us: *You saw me before I was born, in your book they were already written, the days that had been formed before any of them had dawned.*

But what does it really mean to be seen by God? I believe the God who sees is the God who wants relationship. That relationship is about discipleship. As human beings, we live and are dependent on our relationships - to each other, to nature, to ourselves and to God.

Being a disciple can mean being a follower to discover new contexts that one has not seen or new things, unknown. Children can be our role models. They show us so clearly how this learning by following is deeply rooted in us.

A child learns by imitating, practicing, making mistakes, asking for help and trusting that there is support. It is no wonder that Jesus highlights the children as our foremost teachers and role models (Mark 10: 13-16).

Discipleship also means following in the footsteps of those who have already gone before us. This means that we are not alone. To be a disciple is to have company. Jesus never sent anyone out alone. Alone is not strong. We need each other in so many different ways, especially to care for life, to be able to be fellow human beings and take care of our earth, our environment, our climate on which we all depend.

For three years, discipleship will be our theme in Skara diocese. The idea is that we should talk in different ways about what it means to be a disciple. We will in different ways be challenged, go into close dialogue, ask for guidance and share what it means to be a disciple in our time, in our world, in our contexts. To help us with this, I would like to highlight three key words about our attitude towards life; trust, prayer and action. Children can be role models in trust. They may also remind us of the importance of prayer, of the importance of being able to ask for help when we do not understand or cope with

everything. But children are not content with this. They want action. They try, redo and try again.

Follow me!

Several times in New Testament stories Jesus says, Follow me! He always directs this call straight into everyday life, to people who are much like us - busy with everyday chores. Maybe because it is here, in our own lives, with the challenges and opportunities that exist in our own contexts, that we can actually best be disciples.

A very ordinary day when Simon, called Peter, his brother Andrew, Jacob and his brother John and their father Zebedee were out fishing with nets, Jesus came by and said to them; Come and follow me. (Matt 4: 18-22)

On another ordinary day, a rich and righteous man came to Jesus and wondered in frustration what he should do to "gain eternal life." Today, perhaps we should translate that question with: "What is the meaning of life? How do I do the right thing? How do I best live as a whole and a good person?" Deeds or riches did not seem to give him meaning. We may even be able to recognize this in ourselves. That there must be



something more than owning a lot and doing the right thing to prove good. How do I find this 'something more'? Jesus says, also to that man - follow me. (Mark 10: 17-22) Being a disciple and following the one who can show us 'something more' can challenge us to dare to trust.

Trust

Trust takes time. We have probably all experienced that. It takes time to build trust. At the same time, it can be demolished in a few minutes. Maybe because it's so important. We need trust to live, with each other and with ourselves. We need to feel that the person we meet, live or work with, are friends with - can be trusted. This also applies to the relationship with God.

Trust is built through relationships. That is why it is so good to see that Jesus always in his encounters with people begins in the relationship. He talks, asks questions, starts from needs and contexts. At the well in Sykar he is thirsty and asks for some water. At the same time, he talks to the woman at the well about her context and everyday life. (John 4: 1-26)

This is what we need to do when we build relationships with each other. This is how trust is built. Because when we meet each other where we are, as we are, a space of respect is created where trust can grow. This is how God wants to meet us every day, right where we are in our contexts, in our everyday lives, in respect so that trust can grow into a relationship. Faith depends on trust and trust creates relationships.

Prayer

In trust we dare praying. *Do you want to pray with me?* With these words I have started my evening prayer on Facebook every night for a long time. Dear parishioner, do you want to pray with me? In times when we are being challenged, prayer can mean support and security. To be able to direct one's worries and sorrows to someone who receives it can give strength in the midst of the difficult,

light in the midst of the dark and support in the midst of chaos. Knowing that more people share one's prayer is also important in whatever circumstance you live.

Prayer is not just something that can be a vessel for our anxiety. Prayer can also be an expression of our exuberant joy and gratitude. A young man once threw his prayer to God, in great happiness over life: *Lord, I throw my joy like birds to the sky. The night has fluttered away, and I rejoice in the light (from the prayer book I sing your praise all day long).* Gratitude and joy can also turn into prayer.

So what is prayer really? How should we pray? What are the right words? How often should we pray?

All the words we have can become prayer. God does not judge our words, nor our thoughts. Everything we carry, think and form to words is accepted by God. All! Therefore, our prayers cannot be wrong or poorly worded. Everything the heart is filled with, God receives. Even if we cannot even put it into words. Silence can also be our prayer. Prayer is both words and at the same time more than words. Prayer is a conversation, a conversation of the heart with God. No matter how we word it, God hears what we are trying to say and receives it with love.

Action

During our years of discipleship, I would like hymn 292 in the Swedish hymn book to be our theme hymn (please look it up and sing it with others in services and other contexts). Already in the first verse we find the words *make something new, something glowing out of us, lead us to build a world of righteousness - may action and prayer become one.*

The language of action always speaks the loudest. Actions reveals the words. Therefore, we need to let the words be reflected in what we do. That is why we need prayer. Martin Luther emphasized the importance of both action and prayer. It is not in ourselves, not on our own, that we must cope with what meets us. It is not

for us to go alone *into a world where great risks await.* (Hymn 288) It is as the chosen ones, sent out into the world in fellowship with others that we may go.

Some of Jesus' disciples were on their way to Emmaus and talked about the awful things they had experienced when they lost their friend and master. Being close to each other when life does not turn out the way we intended, it is also an act - even if we may feel we do not do much. Sharing what life afflicts us with is perhaps one of the most important "actions" we can perform. It is in fact an act that is a more about being than doing. But surely it is often a challenge for us? It is often so much easier to do something than to just be, at least when we need to remain in what is difficult. The disciples on their way to Emmaus can become our role models. In their footsteps, we can become aware that presence, sharing and "togetherness" are so important to us in our lives.

I also think of Jesus' words to the disciples when they wonder where he lives. Then comes the simple and extremely important call; *Come along and see!* (John 1:39) Above all, it is not a place he shows, it is a path. A path of discipleship.

Didn't our hearts burn within us, said the Emmaus disciples when they thought about the walk and the conversation they shared with each other and with the "stranger". The meeting, the presence, the sharing, the relationship that God always wants with us is the core of discipleship. And the promise is there as our guide: *The one who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life* (John 8:12)

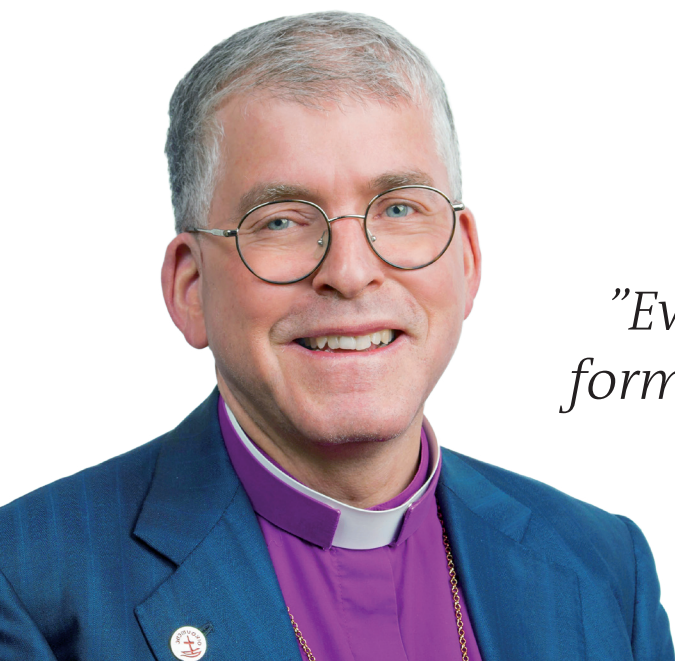
Dear parishioner, my deep faith is that you and I, indeed all of us are seen, infinitely loved, chosen and important in the eyes of God. It is just as the ones we are that God wants us to be and live together. And from the beginning of life and into eternity we are embraced by God...



Conversation questions:

1. What does it mean to you to be seen? By God, by another human being?
2. What do you long to learn, deepen and discover in your life?
3. What is prayer for you?
4. What do you need to dare to trust other people, God?

Svenska kyrkan 
SKARA STIFT



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