



## TALKING THE WALK

# The best disciples

Episode 36 | Dr Paula Gooder

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Here's a quick question for you before we get into this article. Okay, it's more of a task than a question: Name a disciple of Jesus in the New Testament that you wouldn't mind being a bit more like.

Got one?

I'm sure a fair few of you chose Mary, so good at sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Perhaps some of you opted for 'the disciple Jesus loved', who may or may not have been the John who may or may not have written the gospel bearing his name.

Maybe a handful of you went for Paul, with his intellectual prowess, although was he technically a disciple or just an apostle?

The chances are many of you picked Peter – and not only because he's the most prominent disciple in the New Testament and therefore the one we know most about – but because his earthiness, his authenticity and his ability to speak his mind and live his life out loud inspires us.

Speaker and writer Dr Paula Gooder is this month's guest on *The All Terrain Podcast*. She is also currently Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral in London, which means she leads its growing theological and learning programme – a major part of the Church's mission and outreach.

As well as being a key leader in the 'mother church' of a major city, Paula arguably shares other characteristics with Peter. She's a lay leader: someone who has not been formally ordained as a priest. She's an extrovert: she is energised by spending time with others and processes her thoughts out loud. And, like Peter leaving his nets or listening faithfully to his vision about welcoming non-Jews into the early church, she embraces change.

## Fail<sup>1</sup>

Despite our rosy recollections of Peter we may forget that scripture records him getting things wrong far more than his peers.

He rebukes Jesus for saying he must suffer and die in Jerusalem, can't keep schtum and just experience the moment when Jesus is transfigured ('Let's make three dwellings!'), tells Jesus not to wash his feet, promises never to desert him, falls asleep in his darkest hour and denies he knows him three times.

Even worse: despite knowing Jesus is non-violent, *he cuts a man's ear off with a sword*, and Jesus has to heal the man.

Not perfect, then.

But that's all well and good, says Paula.



'We mature in service by getting things wrong, working out that we've got things wrong and doing it a different way. We get things wrong *in the presence and knowledge of Christ*. And the people you observe who serve but don't seem to do the learning are those who don't mature.'

She relates a story about Pope Francis, who earlier in his life 'was the leader of the Jesuit community in Argentina where he lived. And it went completely and utterly wrong. The person who removed him from leadership of the community said, "You're clearly not cut out to be a leader. You'll never be able to lead properly. You need to go and do something else entirely.'" But he went off, and he learned his lessons, and as a result of that is now a spectacular leader.'

That's the kind of thing we need to demand of our leaders, she says: 'Don't tell me about your successes, but tell me about how you've learned from the things that went wrong!'

It's a welcome reminder for us who live in a society that venerates the 'perfect leader', expecting leaders to be 100 per cent successful – and demanding they be sacked when they don't perform or they make a mistake.

Isn't it more biblical to look up to leaders who get it wrong but who cling to Jesus and learn from their mistakes?

-  *We live in a society that often expects leaders to be 100% successful and demands they be sacked when they don't perform or make a mistake. Is that fair to them, or the people they lead?*
-  *Paula isn't saying that failure is the mark of a good leader, but learning from that failure is. Do you agree? What characteristics do people who learn from failure have?*

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<sup>1</sup> Early in my own journey of faith I learnt that no one word perfectly captured the meaning of the word disciple. A disciple of Jesus was a follower, an apprentice, an imitator and a learner of Christ. I noticed how ironic – and profound – it was that the initial letters of those four words spell the word 'fail'.

## Don't plan ahead

Having a clear vision is what we expect of any leader worth their salt. People who only look one day ahead of themselves are going to struggle to get anywhere.

But when it comes to suffering, Paula suggests that's exactly what we should do.

'When you're going through suffering, a natural human instinct is to say, "Let's talk about how it's going to be lovely at the end."

'But the problem is that when you're right in the middle of it, the most annoying thing people can say to you is "it's all going to be alright." You don't know that! You have no idea whether it's going to be alright or not.

'You have to live *now*, and that means you take one step at a time. And if all you've got today is strength enough for half a step, then half a step is what it needs to be.

'The most important thing is remembering that God is with us. In my really hard times, I say to myself over and over, "God is with me, even if it doesn't look like it, even if it doesn't feel like it: God is there." I like to call that divine obstinacy, where you just say, "The world feels like a terrible, awful place, and I can't see God now. I didn't see God yesterday, and I might not see God tomorrow. But I still believe that God is there."

'And then, occasionally, the light breaks through.

'And then you have to do everything you can to hold on to that moment and carry it with you so that, however long it takes until the next time, you can say "I remember that God is with me."

You have probably heard at least one sermon on the miraculous catch of fish in John 21. A group of disciples go fishing but catch nothing, and at dawn a stranger on the beach suggests they throw their nets out on the other side. Their nets now breaking, they realise it's Jesus and excitedly return to shore to eat breakfast with him.

The story kicks off with Peter saying, 'I'm going fishing', and I've heard preachers suggest this demonstrates his lack of faith and a return to his old ways. I disagree.


It's a time of very mixed emotions for the disciples – trauma at having seen Jesus crucified, joy at him rising from the dead, sadness that he's now not with them, confusion over what he has commissioned them to do. Life as they know it with Jesus is over, and while they understand that God is with them, they no longer experience the tangible reality of that because Jesus is physically gone.

They're suffering.

And Peter is going fishing. He's going to fish all night and experience the failure of catching nothing. But perhaps that's the only step he can take right now.

And then the light breaks through.

Jesus turns up, and restores him in a way that will enable him to keep taking the next step forward.


 *Which experiences of God's presence in your life do you cling to when it feels like he's not there?*

## Tell stories

One of the challenges when we're hoping God would show us that he's there with us, says Paula, is that 'God never looks like you expect God to look. We can be looking over in one direction waiting for God to do something, but actually God is somewhere else. If we could hone our gaze, we'd be able to see God.'

'And the way in which you learn to be expert God-noticers is to hear about the occasions when other people have encountered God. Even if you haven't actually had a direct experience of God in the last 10 years, you can still hear other people's stories which remind you that God is always with us.'

'So there's something about telling stories, listening really carefully, and understanding what they tell us about who God is.'

 *As host Jo notes, one of the helpful traditions of The Salvation Army has been its testimony times in meetings. How has hearing the God-stories of other people helped you?*

## Be unashamedly you

When Paula describes herself as someone who loves change, host Jo asks her how that plays out when she works within St Paul's Cathedral, an established institution that is rooted in history and tradition.

Two things struck me about her reply.

First, despite being a woman with a strong sense of identity and calling Paula describes herself as being careful 'not to be too annoying' to those who prefer doing things a certain way.

Part of that reflects her wisdom about the importance of working sensitively alongside people who 'were appointed to do the same thing year after year' – something that many of us who are energised by change and new ideas can identify with – but I couldn't help feeling sorrow at the need she and others feel to dial down how fully they express their passion for change, out of concern for being 'too annoying'.

Second, Paula describes how she relished the challenges of lockdown. 'We suddenly had to do things completely differently. A lot of my colleagues found that quite difficult, whereas I came into my own: "We've got to rethink absolutely everything? Perfect! I've got so many ideas for you."

'What was interesting was working together and realising that I actually brought something to the table, because often it feels like I just bring annoying things to the table. It's about respecting tradition for what it brings, but then also disrupting that as well.'

Peter was definitely a disruptor, in the best sense of the word. He was the first to voice controversial ideas ('You are the Messiah, the son of the living God'), dared Jesus to ask him to walk on water with him, ran to the tomb and didn't think twice about walking straight in, and baptised the very first Gentile followers of Jesus into the early church.

But perhaps he was such a disruptor *precisely because* he was so authentically and unashamedly himself. I wonder how much greater the impact of the church today might be if those of us who are disruptors weren't so sensitive about being 'annoying'?

And also We're not all built to love change, but I wonder what greater impact the church might in the world if all of us were authentically and unashamedly ourselves and chose to embrace change whether we like it or not.

- ≡ *Are you by nature a disruptor? Do you worry about being too 'annoying' and limit how authentically you live as a result? How might you more fully embrace your identity as a disruptor as well as being sensitive to others' needs?*
- ≡ *If you can see how people like Peter have brought about God's purposes by being disruptive but by nature prefer stability, how might you push yourself to be a disruptor for good?*

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