

Marks of Discipleship in African Christianity: Lessons from Mary

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Abstract:

Following Christ is an obligatory task of every Christian. It is undertaking an endless spiritual journey regardless of the hiccups one faces on the way. This paper discusses the essence of discipleship using Mary as an example. Mary was a young Jewish woman betrothed to Joseph, and was from the insignificant town of Nazareth. She came from a very humble family background. She therefore did not have great expectations in life. But her exceptional character exemplified by her love and service to God, humility, faithfulness, dedication and determination made her adopt the title *Theotokos* (mother of God), a prestigious title prayed for by every Jewish woman. God chose her to bear his son, Jesus, the saviour of the world. This way, she became the first disciple of Christ. Following Christ has many challenges, but in all her desperation Mary said 'Yes to God' and followed Christ without turning back, following him up to the foot of his cross. Mary thus became the channel of God's grace to humanity. Mary is therefore the model of discipleship in the Church, especially here in Africa where the Church is making converts and not disciples. Christians must know that like Mary, they are Christ's bearers in the world. Following Christ is a lifelong process where one surrenders all for the sake of Christ. Discipleship comes at the second hour. In the first hour Christ reveals himself to us and calls us to follow him. In the second hour we make a stark decision to follow him regardless of the obstacles on the way.

Key Words: Discipleship, Marks of Discipleship, African Christianity, Mary

1. Introduction

Following Christ is an obligatory requirement of every Christian. The calling of the disciples in the Gospels clearly illustrates this (Mtt.4: 18-22; 9: 9-13; Mark 1:16-20; 2:13-17; Lk.5:1-11, 27-32). The phrase "Come and follow me" shows Jesus' expectation that his disciples would follow him without at any time turning back. A notable thing is the response of the disciples after they are called. They leave their nets, boats and offices to follow him. This shows the sacrifice that is to be made by a disciple of Christ. Following Christ is a life-time activity and thus the disciples had to leave behind everything else to follow him. In view of this, Carson et. al (1994, p. 910) says that Jesus demanded that his disciples have complete commitment in their involvement with him. Robert Coleman sees this as Jesus' evangelistic strategy to ensure that his mission would continue even after he is gone (Coleman, 1963 p.27). The Greek word for 'follow' is *akoloutheo*. It means

"Come here, behind me". In this case, Jesus leads the way while his followers/disciples follow. The Greek word *akolouthos* which means 'a follower' or 'a companion' signifies the close relationship that exists between the one being followed and the follower. Coleman (1963, p. 41) uses term 'Association' to describe this relationship. He says that "Having called his men, Jesus made a practice of being with them". His last promise to his disciples possibly explains the nature of this relationship: "And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age" (Mtt. 28:20). According to John Gills, this promise is made to his immediate disciples and those who will succeed them in future generations to the end of time. He will be with them in a spiritual sense to assist them in their work, to comfort them under all discouragements, to supply them with his grace, to protect them from all enemies and to preserve them from all evils (Gills, 2015).

Thus, Christian Spirituality is expressed in discipleship because Jesus did not call his followers to accept a religious philosophy or accept a set of mysterious doctrines. He called them to follow him and become like him. Therefore, Christian Spirituality must issue in Christ like living (Wilson, 2002). Following Christ is undertaking an endless spiritual journey regardless of the hiccups one faces on the way. Tang (2012) connects Christian spirituality with discipleship by arguing that “Christian Spirituality is the process of spiritual formation of a disciple of Jesus Christ for an authentic and fulfilled Christian life . . .” This understanding is vital for the African Church which Egbunu and Titre (2008) inform that has been keen in conversion but not making disciples. The Church in Africa has been described by many as being a mile wide but not an inch deep (Kagama, 2004). It is a Church that boasts of a tremendous physical growth but little to show spiritually. Some people will ask how spirituality can be measured or determined. Paul’s letter to the Galatians has the ‘Fruit of the Spirit’ which can play a significant role in determining spiritual growth among Christian community. He says, ‘ But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control’ (Gal.5: 22-23). Disciples should use this as the measuring rod in their spiritual growth. Two months ago there was a physical fight among Christians in one of the independent churches in Kenya. The fight had been engineered by some people who were fighting for leadership in that Church. A colleague came to my office and asked me ‘Is this how Disciples of Christ are supposed to handle conflicts? Are they not killing the Church? Can these church leaders be termed as spiritual leaders?’ Disciples of Christ before undertaking any activity must hearken to the words in Hebrews 12: 1-2: ‘As for us we have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and the sin which holds on to us so tightly. . .’

Jenkins (2002) affirms that the Christian World’s centre of gravity is currently shifting towards Africa, Asia and Latin America. In tropical Africa, for example about 33,000 people become Christians each day (Kandiah, 2015). This has made the African Church experience a phenomenal numerical growth over the past decades. Africans today represent 20% of the

world’s Christian population (Catholic World News, 2015). This trend suggests that within a few decades Africa will outstrip Europe and America to become the continent with the world’s largest number of Christians (World Catholic News, 2015). What is however doubtful is the quality of African Christians. The African Church has many followers but few disciples. It is possibly this lack of seriousness in the formation of disciples in the African Church that led Roland Oliver caution that “. . . Such a Church risks disintegrating at the centre while expanding at the circumference” (Oliver, 1952).

The African Church will only stand if she refocuses on making disciples other than just conversion. In this paper, I want explore the importance of following Christ or being his disciples as opposed to being just church members. I will use Mary, the mother of Jesus as an example. I am convinced that there is a lot that the African Christians in their spiritual struggle can learn from Mary. As Bifet (1995) acknowledges, Mary was the first believer and disciple of Christ. It is she who gave Christ to the world. She thus becomes the model of discipleship. Christians should learn how to follow Christ from her as she was the first follower.

2. Mary’s Background

Little is known about her background, but it is widely known that she was the mother of our Lord. According to the Church tradition, Mary’s father was Joachim and her mother was Saint Anne (Brownrigg, 2001). Anne was born in Bethlehem and married to Joachim of Nazareth, both descendants of David (Protectors of the Order of Carmelites, 2015). Before Mary was conceived Anne was barren and far advanced in age (Brownrigg, 2001). Joachim and Anne first lived in Galilee but later on settled in Jerusalem. Joachim was a rich pious man who generously contributed to the poor and to the synagogue (Souvay, 1910). The life of this religious couple was somehow muddled up by the high priest in Jerusalem when he rejected their sacrifices on the basis of their childlessness interpreting it as a sign of divine displeasure. This made Joachim to withdraw to the desert where he fasted and did penance for forty days. Angels then appeared to Joachim and Anne and promised them a child (World Meeting of Families, 2015). This way

Mary was born. It is possible that her parents resettled in Nazareth as other stories about Mary as recorded in the Gospels show that she was living there and not in Jerusalem.

In the Synoptic Gospels (specifically Matthew and Luke), we learn that when the angelic announcement of the birth of Jesus occurred, Mary was living in Nazareth, in Galilee and was engaged to a carpenter named Joseph (Marshall, et. al, 1962; Lk. 1:26 ff). Joseph was of Davidic descent (Lk.1:27; Mt. 1:20) and his father according to Saint Matthew was Jacob (Mt. 1:15-16), and according to Saint Luke he was Heli (Lk.3:23).¹ What is however clear is that both Joseph and Mary were of Davidic lineage.

Both Matthew and Luke record that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit at a time when Joseph was betrothed to Mary, but before he had intercourse with her (Mt.1:18; Lk.1:27, 35). Luke records the revelation by an angel to Mary; while Matthew records that the angel appeared to Joseph. In Matthew the name of the angel is not mentioned but in Luke it was Gabriel, but it is common sense to deduce that in both cases it was Angel Gabriel who regards himself as God's messenger (Lk.1:19). According to Marshall et. al (1962), Matthew possibly drew his information from Joseph, probably through James, the brother of Jesus, and Luke obtained his information directly from Mary.

Mary was married to Joseph before Jesus was born (Mt. 1: 24). After marriage the family lived in Nazareth (Mt. 2:23; Lk.2:39). The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the final years of the tyrant known Herod the Great (Akin 2015; Mt. 2:1). Matthew alone records the escape of the family into Egypt, where Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus took refuge from the jealous anger of Herod the Great (Marshall, et. al, 1962; Mt. 2:13-15). The birth of Jesus made Herod to panic and had all the Baby boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas killed. Fortunately, Jesus was not killed as his family had stayed in Egypt until Herod died (Mt.2:16-18). Luke records Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth who greeted her as “the mother of my Lord” with

the words “Blessed are you among women” (Lk. 1:42f). Mary was blessed as she would be the mother of the Messiah, something that would never happen to any other woman. Luke also has Mary's song of praise, commonly known as ‘The Magnificat’ (Lk. 46-55). The song manifests the appreciative character of Mary to God for choosing her among many women to be the mother of God (in Greek *Theotokos*).

A single appealing glimpse of Christ's childhood is given to us by Luke (2:41- 51), who records the typically anxious words of Mary at the discovery of the lost boy Jesus, “Son why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you” (v.48), and the well known reply of the boy, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house” (v.49) (Marshall, et. al, 1962). Carson et. al (1994) explains this to mean that Jesus was telling his parents that they ought to have known where to find him, that is, in his Father's house. Verse 50 says that “They did not understand what he was saying to them”. According to Carson et. al (1994), Jesus' character and role went beyond their understanding. What seems to me interesting in this episode is the character of Mary. Although she knows very well that Joseph is not Jesus' father, she still uses the expression, “Your father”. Naturally if a child gets lost and the parents find him after searching him for three days, we expect the father to furiously say something. The fact that Joseph chooses to keep quiet says a lot about his thinking concerning the boy. The situation is even aggravated by the boy openly asserting that he knew that Joseph was not his father (v.48). Nevertheless, Mary handles the situation very wisely and they go home. By referring to her husband as “Your Father”, could have made Joseph feel that, “Furthermore I am recognized”. What lesson can African Christian women draw from this?

As for Mary's other family members, we know from Matthew and Mark that she had on top of Jesus, four sons namely James, Joseph, Judas and Simon; and more than one daughters (Mk.6:3; Mt.13: 55-56). Mary had brought up her family united as evidenced by the family members' joint endeavour to speak to Jesus (Mt.12:46; Mk.3:31; Lk.8:19). While I do not want to venture into the debate that these were children of another Mary as Mary the mother of Jesus remained a virgin (as taught by the Roman Catholic Church), the Gospels show explicitly that these were children

¹ This looks like a contradiction. But it seems likely that the genealogy in Lk. 3 is not that of Joseph but of Mary. While Luke has already shown that Jesus was not the son of Joseph (Lk 3:23), Matthew is keen to trace the legal relationship back to David and Abraham.

of Joseph and Mary born after Jesus. It is also erroneous to claim that a married woman remained a virgin. My concern is to show that Mary was a committed mother who brought up her children united and concerned with each other. This is an important lesson for the African Christian parents. Discipleship starts at home.

Apparently, Mary did not accompany Jesus on his missionary journeys, although she was present with him at the marriage in Cana (Marshall 1962; Jn. 2:1ff). We also meet Mary at the foot of the cross (Jn.19:25), where she and the beloved disciple are entrusted by Christ to each others care (Jn. 19: 26-27). Matthew, Mark and Luke record that many women who had followed Jesus from Galilee helping him followed Jesus at the cross and stood at a distance watching helplessly (Mt.27:55-56; Mk.15:40-41; Lk.23:49). John Hargreaves highlights that these women had cooked meals and mended clothes for Jesus and his followers (Hargreaves, 1965, p. 274). Carson et. al (1994) denotes that these women had supported Jesus and his twelve disciples with money and food and loving care. These were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph; and Salome, who was sister to Mary the mother of Jesus, the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John. We are not told much about Mary the mother of James and Joseph. Matthew regards to her as “ the other Mary” (Mt. 27:61; Mt.28:1). What is also notable about this Mary is that three days after Jesus’ death, after Sabbath, she was among the three women who had gone to anoint the Lord’s body, only to find that he had resurrected (Mk. 16:1-8). Although some translations use Joses as the second son of this Mary, it is important to note that two of Mary the mother of Jesus’ other sons were James and Joseph. Some scholars believe that this Mary was the mother of James, the disciple of Jesus. Others believe that she was sister to Jesus’ mother. Others still identify this Mary as the wife of Cleopas or Alphaeus (Bible Gateway, 2015). The fact that John mentions that Mary the mother of Jesus was present during crucifixion (John 19:25) is a fact that cannot be just be overlooked. There is thus all likelihood that the Mary identified as the mother of James and Joseph and also as ‘the other Mary’ in the Synoptic Gospels was Mary the mother of Jesus. This view is also shared by Judith Jones, who in her effort to describe ‘the other Mary’ observes that,

Earlier Matthew described her as ‘Mary the mother of James and Joseph’ . . . Two of Jesus’ brothers are named James and Joseph. In all likelihood, then, ‘the other Mary’ is Mary the mother of Jesus (Jones, 2017).

The decision of the Gospel writers not to identify Mary explicitly as Jesus’ mother may seem strange. But the issue here is not to emphasize her biological relationship to Jesus but her role as the disciple (cf. Jones, 2017). It is also very unlikely that Mary was not present during her son’s crucifixion. That Mary followed Christ up to the cross is an imperative lesson for the African Christians on what discipleship entails.

Mary’s life of prayer and spirituality is revealed in Acts 1:14 where she together with her sons, other women and the disciples met constantly for prayer. John Gills elucidates that although this is the last time we hear of Mary and how long she lived after this remains uncertain, her continuance with the apostles of Christ shows her religion and piety, and was both for the increase of her faith and spiritual comfort (Gills, 2016).

3. Mary’s Character: Lessons for African Christians

Whenever I look at the life of Mary, I have never failed to see a picture of a traditional African woman worth emulation. The Jewish culture, like our Africa culture had a little place for women as men dominated every aspect of life. It is amazing how this woman, Mary manages to keep her name in the records of history in such a dominating male culture. Although Mary was a Jew she was very similar in character to the traditional African woman and there is a lot that African women and general Christians can learn from her. In the traditional African society, a woman is the biggest gift that the society has. They ensure the continuity of the family or community and are thus not killed during war. In Africa, women are viewed as the pillars of the society. They ensure the success of the family by getting married and having children. Their traditional role is to bear and raise children as well as undertake numerous duties which give them an indispensable status in the society. For instance, Anderson (1986, p. 115) informs that an ideal African wife has at least four children, is a good mother, able to teach her children and loyal to the clan. According to Kenyatta (1968) among the Kikuyu, the mother

is called ‘Maito’, a very honorable term which is desirable by every woman. When a woman reaches this stage of motherhood she is very much respected not only by her family but the entire community. Among the Ameru she feeds the family, cares for the children, keeps the compound clean, looks after the husband and cultivates the farm (Kagema, 1998).

Today the changes that have taken place in Africa as in the whole world have greatly affected the African family. This has in turn affected the African Church as when the family is unstable, the church cannot claim to be stable. Issues like gender violence, poverty, competition between men and women, discrimination against women, search for freedom by women, divorce and remarriage, unfaithfulness by either of the spouses, etc have created a situation in Africa, where the traditional ‘motherhood’ is slowly dissipating. As noted by Shorter and Njiru (2001), women in Africa have been socially and economically disadvantaged for a long time. Thus the majority of the poor, illiterate, unemployed, single parents, etc in Africa are women. Of recent, women in Africa have been fighting against this exploitation, discrimination and oppression. This has not gone without some challenges in the African families as well as in the Church. It is right to say that some women have overreacted. I will use my own observation to illustrate this. In December 2016, I visited my home church for Christmas service. I noted that although women were the majority, there were many active men as many of them were members of the church committee and others were actively involved in the other church activities. There were about 98 women and 57 men. This year (2017), on 18th June, I attended the retirement service of the vicar in the same church. I was shocked to find that there was only one man and the number of women had remained stable. I decided to investigate the cause of this. The following day, I visited the families around the church asking men what had gone wrong that they now do not attend the Church services. I was able to talk to 29 men (about 50.9% of the previous population of men in that Church). Interestingly, all of them said that they had left the Church to women because during church elections held in February 2017, women had colluded to elect only their fellow women to Church committees. Still, others argued that even at home their wives were not respecting them.

This is the problem that we have to wrestle with today in Africa. ‘The motherhood’ that was evidenced in the traditional African woman is no longer there. Jane Kathure in her study titled ‘Effectiveness of church based initiation programmes in the empowerment of the boy child’, shows that in the name of fighting for their rights, many women of Africa, Christians included, have lost their traditional role of ‘motherhood’ and have become ‘exploiters’ in whose hands many men have really suffered (Kathure, 2014). This is a true observation because the Daily Nation reported on 1st August 2015, that in Kenya, men in Nairobi and other towns suffer most domestic abuse. While we are not saying that women are not victims of domestic violence, or that they should take a low profile as they are being subjugated, we are arguing that they have lost their initial calling of caring, love, reconciliation etc as mothers. The revered glory of motherhood is slowly fading away.

This is unlike in the traditional African society where motherhood was a highly esteemed position due to the essential role mothers played in the society. For example, among the Ameru, especially in the Imenti sub-tribe, women were used in the ritual of installation of a *Mugwe* (The Ameru prophet) (Bernadi, 1959, p. 97). Although the ritual usually involved old mothers, in it we can see the importance attached to women by our African traditional society. This was usually due to their remarkable character. Old mothers were chosen for the ritual because they were viewed as sinless. The installed *Mugwe* had to avoid sin as at all costs as he was to be above these mothers morally. These old women were considered to be near to God than old men. The *Mugwe* was expected to be even more near to God than anybody else (Bernadi, 1959, p. 98).

In Mary, we see the reflection of an African mother. All women in Africa and even general Christian family have a lot to learn from her as we develop the African Church, family and community. She was a caring, loving and dedicated mother, a woman who amid all distractions and despair followed her son to the foot of his cross (Stauernagel, 2003). Similarly to what happened among the Ameru where some women were chosen for the rituals as they were regarded as sinless and near to God, Mary was chosen as the woman through whom salvation will come to mankind (Mtt.1:21). She is regarded as

the ‘most blessed of all women’ (Lk.1: 28, 42). This means that among many women, she was God’s preference. Some Biblical scholars interpret this to mean that she was the most favoured woman, while the Church of Rome maintains that she above all women had the honour freely conferred by God upon her, to be the mother of the Messiah (Benson Commentary, 2016). On top of this, phrases such as the ‘life of prayer’, ‘the spirit of prophecy’, ‘the spirit of sanctification’, and ‘immunity and ‘freedom from sin and death’ are directly applied to Mary (Benson Commentary, 2016). This shows the nature of her character. Are there Christians like her in the African Church? According to Matthew Henry, Christians must, as Mary here, guide their desires by the word of God (Matthew Henry Commentary Bible, 1995). The character of Mary is described by Hughes (2002, p. 37) by her observation that, “Mary’s character was exemplary. She was a simple mortal woman who was unpretentious, holy, humble and God-centred. She was a faithful obedient servant of God”.

In the traditional African society girls and young women went through education so as to become responsible wives and mothers. For example, among the Ameru, girls were taught how to behave towards men, how to cook, how to take care of the children and how to look after their husbands (Kagema, 1998). Jomo Kenyatta informs us that among the Kikuyu, when a girl is ready to be circumcised she is taught manners such as how to behave when married, how to raise up children, how to treat strangers, how to behave towards her father and mother in law and also her husband’s rights in sexual matters (Kenyatta, 1968). This teaching is usually given by her mother and older women. Similarly, although Mary was just a young teenager in an insignificant town called Nazareth and was from a very humble family, it is notable is that she had been carefully trained in the scriptures and she knew great portions of them by heart. For instance, she knew that God had promised to send the Messiah, who would rescue her people Israel and be their King (see her song in Lk. 1:46-55). We can only attribute this to her devoted parents. When she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, she stayed with her relative, Elizabeth for three months (Lk. 1: 56), learning how to be a good mother and wife. In her day as a girl, she was betrothed to Joseph (Lk.1: 27; Mtt. 1:18). They

would be married within a year and she was spending this last year learning how to be a good Jewish wife and mother (Women of the Bible, 2015).

Because of this education, Mary became a very responsible wife and mother. We need responsible women and men in Africa so that both the family and the Church can stand. It is unfortunate that the traditional education that was meant to make young people responsible adults is no longer there. The assumption that children will learn everything including morals in the school and the Church has really affected Africa. We have seen that Mary was a woman of good character. But we have also noted that she had learnt these traits from her home. Discipleship must begin at home if we want to build a strong Church in Africa. We read from Proverbs 22:6 that, “Teach the child the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it”.

4. Mary’s Pattern of Discipleship: Handling the Second Hour²

Following Christ first and foremost means Christ calls us to follow him, and then that we are willing to do so. Discipleship comes at the second hour. In the first hour, Christ reveals himself to us and calls us follow him. How we respond towards this call is very important. The decision to follow him comes at the second hour. After Christ has called us, we make a stark decision to follow him in season and out of season (cf. 2 Tim.4:2). The point here is that nobody can call him/herself to be a disciple. Christ rather calls us. How we respond to his calling matters a lot. The rich young man finds it difficult to abandon his worldly possessions to become a disciple (Mk. 10:17-31). In the first hour, the Lord appears to him and tells him ‘. . . come follow me’ (v.21). The second hour is met with indignation as the young man escapes on hearing that he should sell everything he has, give it to the poor and follow Christ (v.22). This indicates that many people are unwilling to lay off their pleasure to follow Christ. The second hour

² This is borrowed from Valdir Steuernagel (2003)’s concept of ‘theology coming at the second hour’. While he argues that theology comes at the second hour, I argue discipleship is second hour occurrence. The difference between theology and discipleship is that theology deals with the discourse and reflection, while discipleship deals with following the master or teacher. While theology is mainly an academic discipline, discipleship is a commitment of every Christian to follow Christ.

for many of us is met with a fallen face as we think of our positions, wealth, respect, gratification, power etc. Interestingly, those that have responded to Christ’s call to follow him have done so while at the same time craving to the worldly pleasure and opulence. This has in turn led to many prosperity gospel preachers in the African Church today. For example, a study by Dickson Nkonge Kageema and Millicent Maina in 2014 on ‘The Causes of the New Charismatic Movements in Kenya’ showed that many people are flocking to these movements not because of sole conviction to follow Christ, but because their leaders, founders or preachers mainly promise their followers all kinds of prosperity once they join them. Such include jobs, money, land, good families, power, recognition, successful businesses and so on (Kageema & Maina, 2014). This is the shape that Christian discipleship in Africa is taking today.

Mary’s response to Christ’s call to follow him was distinct from ours. She handled the second hour differently from many of us. According to Hughes (2002), Mary was the first disciple of Christ. This view is supported by many scholars, among them Steve Manskar who elucidates that as the first disciple, Mary became a living channel of grace for the world. God became flesh and lived among us through Mary (Manskar, 2015). According to Fournier (2016), she was the first evangelizer and the first disciple of her own son, saviour and Lord Jesus Christ.

In the first hour, God appeared to Mary through Angel Gabriel and affirmed his presence in her life (Lk.2:26-28). Like any other Jew, Mary knew that God would send his anointed one, the messiah to save his people, and this will happen through a virgin. Prophet Isaiah had prophesied that “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel” (Is.7:14). As noted in the ‘Women in the Bible’ (2016), every Jewish girl prayed to be the mother of this messiah. This was of course not so with Mary. Although she loved God and wanted to serve him with all her heart, she was just a poor girl in an insignificant town of Nazareth, from a humble family, with no great expectations that her life was going to be any different from her mother’s or from that of any other women in her town (Women of the Bible, 2016). We may understand the way people in general took her village or town from the reactions of Nathanael to the news that Philip and

others had in Jesus found the one ‘whom Moses and the prophets wrote about’ (Jn.1:45). Nathanael asked, “Can anything good come from Nazareth” (Jn.1:46). According to Pritchard (2012), nothing much came from Nazareth, an obscure village tucked away in the hills of Galilee. This explains why Mary was in great shock when the angel informed her that God chose her to conceive and bear his son who she would name Jesus (Lk.1:27-31). As a human being, the presence of the divine messenger scared her. But she also wondered how she would explain this to Joseph, what her parents would think, what the community would think and why God had chosen her (Manskar, 2015). The words of the angel confirm that the ‘hidden Christ’ was calling her to be his disciple. He said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most High will overshadow you, therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the son of God. . . . For nothing is impossible with God” (Lk.1:35-37).

Mary’s response to this call is amazing. In other words, the way she handles the second hour reflects a character worth emulation by all of us who God has called or is calling to be disciples in his Church here in Africa and in the world. She said, “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said” (Lk.1:38). What this means according to Clarke’s Commentary (1832) is that “I fully credit what you say and I am perfectly ready to obey your commands and to accomplish all the purposes of your grace concerning me”. Mary is simply saying that “Regardless of what Joseph, my future husband will say or what my parents and community will think, I am willing to be the Lord’s disciple”. The decision she had made was costly yet she opted not to retreat. For example, Matthew’s Gospel records that upon discovery that she was expectant, Joseph wanted to break his engagement to her privately (Mtt.1:19). Following Christ is a choice we must make regardless of the consequences. Manskar (2015) observes that Mary chose to say “Yes to God”. She took a step of faith and trusted that God knew what he was doing. She trusted God and placed her life and future in his hands. Trusting God is an important mark of discipleship. Sometimes we worry a lot about how our future will be after we follow Christ. Mary was worried about her family, yet she made a gallant step to become Christ’s disciple. Hughes (2003, p.37)

explains that Mary experiences the presence of God by becoming a disciple of Jesus and reveals the graciousness of God by readily responding to God’s goodness and making herself available to him. This is a good lesson for us. The second hour should be an hour of saying “Yes to God”. It is the hour of making a bold decision to follow Christ regardless of what lay ahead. The song that was sang by the first Presbyterian Christians in Chogoria, Meru in response to Dr. Irvine’s call to follow Christ amid the numerous challenges they were facing such as rejection by their families becomes meaningful to us here. They used to sing,

Ngakuthingata mwathani wakwa x2
Ona bandega, ningugwitikira x2
Ntigacoka nyuma (Murianki, OI, 2017)

Translation

I will follow you my Lord x2
Even if they reject me, I will accept youx2
I will never turn back

5. Following Christ as a Listening Exercise

We will start this section by looking at my reflection on discipleship in another place. The term disciple, from the Greek *mathetes*, means a ‘learner’ or a pupil of a teacher, in this case Christ (our Rabbi or teacher) Marshall, et. al. 1996 p. 277). In this regard, I make an observation which is vital for our reflection as we follow Christ,

The basis of all learning is a readiness to listen to the one teaching us. The Gospels record about many formal teaching sessions which Jesus held with his disciples but, besides these, they must have spent many hours simply listening to Jesus as they walked along together, rested by the roadside or shared their simple meals. It pays for the Christians (disciples) to listen to their teacher (Jesus) through prayer, fellowship, scripture et cetera. Of course God has many ways of communicating to us but perhaps one of the most important skills to learn in the process of Christian discipleship is the ability to listen to what Jesus (teacher) is telling us. The imperative place of self-reflection in Christian life as one keenly listens to the voice of the Master cannot be overstated. ‘What is the Lord telling or teaching me?’ Every experience in the life of a Christian has a lesson to teach him or her. . . . The duty of all disciples is thus to keep on listening to what the Holy Spirit is telling or teaching them in all situations (Kagema, 2014).

Followers of Christ must continually listen to what he is saying to them. Mary exemplified this quality very well. When the Lord’s messenger appeared to her, she listened attentively (Lk.

1:26-38). Manskar (2015) denotes that her response to God’s voice was faithful cooperation with God’s mission for the world.

Listening in this context is close to what Coleman (1963, p.41) refers to as ‘Association’. Having called his disciples, Jesus made a practice of being with them. This was the essence of his training program-just letting his disciples follow him (Coleman, 1963). As they follow him they have to listen attentively to his voice, just as Mary did. Are African Christian disciples listening to what their teacher is telling them? This is a question that can be asked many times with no satisfying answer. Some ecclesiologists who have studied the Church in Africa have given us worrying conclusions about it. For instance, in 1950s, Roland Oliver had to say that “. . . The Church in Africa risks disintegrating at the centre while expanding at the circumference” (Oliver, 1952). In 2011, Dickson Nkonge Kagema while following the same argument had to elucidate that “. . . although the Church in Africa is boasting of achieving an outstanding physical growth, it risks crumbling at the core due to lack of serious Christians”. The underlying argument here is that the African Church has many adherents but few disciples. The Church in Africa has many followers but their quality is doubtful. In other words, few followers of Christ are willing to listen to what their master or teacher is telling them. This is possibly why Africa is basically a Christian continent with Christians constituting over fifty percent of Africa’s population (Catholic World News, 2015), yet the continent continues to bleed from the pains of tribal animosity, nepotism, corruption, hatred, injustice, authoritarianism, violence, poverty, greed, etc (Tutu, 2004; Mwiti & Dueck, 2007). For the success of the African Church, the disciples (Christians) must attentively listen to what Christ, their teacher and master is telling them and at all cost try to be like him. The character of Christ is humble service, holiness, righteousness, purity, love, forgives, compassion submission, obedience, kindness and generous giving (Character of Christ, 2017). Christ in his association with us calls us to be like him (Eph. 5:1-2).

6. Do you want to follow Christ? Offer Your Womb!

Steuernagel (2003) makes this clear to us. Asking for someone’s womb is asking a lot. The womb is

the deepest place where life is born. Offering your womb is a great thing indeed. But this is what discipleship implies. It is surrendering what is considered very precious to us for the sake of following Christ. It is saying as this humble apron woman, Mary says “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said” (Lk.1:38). And so the woman gives out her most precious thing in her: her virgin womb (Steuernagel, 2003, p. 104). Being an African where virginity according to Anderson (1986), is highly regarded, valued and prized, I can only guess the meaning of such an offer. In most of the African communities every girl is supposed to be a virgin at the time of marriage. For example, among the Ameru, the bride spends the night with bridegroom and the following day the latter has to confirm to their both families that she was indeed a virgin. If she was, the marriage is allowed to continue. If she was not, the girl and her family are ridiculed for losing her virginity and the marriage is discontinued. Mbiti (1969, p.127) informs that among the Nandi, girls are examined for virginity and it is great shame and anger to the girls and their parents if they are found to have lost their virginity. In some cases such girls are speared to death, while the virgin ones receive gifts of cows or sheep.

This is the precious thing that Mary gave for the sake of following Christ. It is not her only her virginity that she loses. She risks losing her husband, family and community respect as Joseph and other people discover that she is pregnant. The question of how she will explain this to Joseph and others swirls in her mind (Lk 1:29). The answer to God’s revelation is however clear: A life surrender. A womb surrender. A virginity surrender (Steuernagel, 2003). Following Christ thus means total surrender for his sake. The song for the brethren in response to Christ’s revelation and call is,

All to Jesus, I surrender, All to him I freely give

I will ever love and trust him, in his presence daily life

I surrender all, I surrender all

All to thee, my blessed saviour, I surrender all.

Jesus Christ himself gives very clear instructions on how to surrender as his followers. In Matthew 16: 24-25, he tells his disciples that,

If anyone would come after me,
let him deny himself and take up

his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Jesus goes on to say that,

Whoever comes to me cannot be my disciple unless he loves me more than his father and his mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, and himself as well (Lk.14:26).

Therefore, following Christ entails giving in the treasured things in our lives for his sake.

7. Following Christ up to the foot of His Cross

There is a lot that followers of Christ can learn from this woman, Mary who against all odds followed Christ up to the foot of His cross. Although there are many arguments pertaining to her presence during crucifixion, John affirms that she was present and Jesus even talked to her (Jn.19:25-25). This shows her determination to follow the saviour up to his death. Fournier (2016) denotes that Mary was there at the incarnation, birth, crucifixion and resurrection of God incarnate. She was there throughout the ‘hidden years of Nazareth’.

Following Christ entails following him without retreating despite the desperation until you witness his salvific power. And that is what Mary did. Steuernagel (2003, p.111) clarifies this by his assertion that,

Challenging everyone and everything, and overcoming herself she followed the path to the foot of the cross. Crying and stumbling it was there that she found her true place. Tough place, unacceptable, and strange place. An absurd place of peace. There at the cross, she unexpectedly felt at home.

The cross is the toughest place to be, yet it is the best place to be (Steuernagel, 2003). It is the most necessary place to be in spite of its unpleasantness. It is at the cross that discipleship begins and ends. It reminds us of the forgiveness we have received from God through the death of his son (Mk.10:45). The cross is the place of salvation- salvation that comes through grace. It is the place of grace - A place to meet with God’s unconditional love. Steuernagel (2003) refers to it as the place of life. It is the place of death that creates life. Since all of us need life, it is a place

we cannot take lightly. It is the place where all the followers of Christ, like Mary must go. Jesus words that ‘I have come that they have life, and have it to the full’ (Jn.10:10) can only be understood in relation to the cross since without it, there is no abundant life.

8. Conclusion

Although Mary is not usually counted as one of the disciples of Jesus Christ, she was an outstanding disciple worth our emulation and her contribution to the life of the Church is indispensable. Even though she came from a relatively humble family and that in itself has its own challenges, she overcame all them and became a reputable woman in the whole world as the one through whom God’s grace was revealed to humanity. She took the title *Theotokos* (God’s bearer or Mother of God), the prestigious title that every Jewish woman prayed for. What is striking about Mary was her love for God. She wanted to serve him with all her heart. Due to her humility, dedication, faithfulness and selflessness she became the channel of God’s grace humanity. God became flesh and lived among us through Mary. God’s mission of saving the world became possible through her.

Mary is thus the model of the African Church and the Church in general as Christ’s followers are called to be Christ’s bearers in the world. Each of us is chosen and called to be like her. In spite of the difficulties she encountered on the way, she followed Christ up to the end. This is a requirement for all disciples.

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