

METHODIST RECORDER

## **BOOK REVIEW**

by

**Tom Stuckey**

Books by Rowan Williams are unfailingly profound. While some require heavy intellectual demands of the reader his latest **Being Disciples** (SPCK 2016, £6.29) is a little book of sublime simplicity.

This is a beautifully crafted work; just 86 pages of large type to help you ‘see more clearly, love more dearly and follow more nearly the way of Jesus Christ’. At the end of each of the six chapters are two questions to aid personal reflection and group discussion.

Discipleship is about being with Jesus; learning stillness, attentiveness and expectancy. It is a Trinitarian mode of life inviting us to be in the company of those Jesus seeks and keeps. Today we seem to have lost our bearings and sense of identity. With reference to St John of the Cross and 1 Corinthians 13 Dr Williams explores faith and understanding, hope and memory, love and want. These dimensions, he says, are at the heart of our discipleship, our learning and our growing in Christ.

‘Give us this day our daily bread’ leads to a reflection on forgiveness. ‘Forgiveness is one of the most radical ways in which we are able to nourish one another’s humanity...Forgiveness is the exchange of the bread of life and the bread of truth...to forgive is to share in the helplessness of

God.’ We can only approach God and each other with our hands and our hearts open to receive as we do in the Eucharist.

His chapter on ‘Holiness’ is a real eye-opener. The word ‘holiness’ for Jesus had nothing to do with being separate or detached but rather it is about being totally involved. In the pursuit of holiness we choose to go into situations that are most difficult. In the middle of the pain and mess a holy person somehow opens up a new landscape which is bathed in the extraordinariness of God.

The chapter on ‘Faith in Society’ begins with a penetrating analysis of our society. I have seldom read anything so succinct yet so devastating perceptive. This leads the author to suggest two foundational ethical principles. First, in every encounter with another person we must recognise that we are standing on holy ground. We therefore give that person the same reverence we give to God. Second, in our community together we should rejoice in our dependence on each other.

Williams is confident that our weak and unassuming voluntary activities do over a period of time shift the values and priorities which society takes for granted. He gives examples of this and says ‘churches and other faith groups are trustees and custodians of the long-term questions not dependent on political fashions and majorities.’

He begins his final chapter on ‘Life in the Spirit’ by questioning the word ‘spirituality’. For Williams, spirituality is not so much about the inner life but

about the wholesome cultivation of *virtues*. His aim is to encourage the flourishing of ‘ordinary goodness and practical generosity’. He does this by reflecting on self-knowledge, stillness, growth and joy. Again the author produced a shock to my system by suggesting ‘self-knowledge’ owed more to the ancient idea of ‘dispassion’ (*apatheia*) than to modern psychology.

This is undoubtedly the best book I have read on discipleship since Bonhoeffer wrote his famous work back in the 1930s. Williams’ book is equally inspiring yet his presentation glows with a joyful radiance. Here is pure gold. Read it, pray it and live it.

**The Rev Tom Stuckey is a former President of the Conference.**

**589 words**