# The Gateway of Discipline – leading us into ministry

And so we are calling this series ‘Gateways to the Kingdom’ because these values can be hard for us to adopt, they can be obstacles for us on the road of following Jesus.

- ***Gateway 1*** was **revelation** which leads into the Kingdom in the first place. This is the beginning of the journey with Jesus and was a reminder that we can only enter the Kingdom if God draws us, or if Jesus reveals himself to us.

- ***Gateway 2*** was **commitment** which leads us into community. This was a reminder that God is a community, 3-in-1, and that God calls us into community. God’s Kingdom usually comes within community, and being part of a community requires commitment and investment in its common life.

***Gateway 3*** which is **submission**…

Submission, or more specifically, serving others, as part of our journey in responding to God’ kingdom.

And the fourth gateway that we’ll be exploring this morning is **Gateway 4: Discipline**. Just as we exercise our body for our physical well-being, so too do we need to be disciplined to enable our spiritual well-being.

And our Lenten season is particularly a time when we create space in our sometimes-too-busy lives for disciplines such as daily devotion, self-examination or penance.

I want to share with you a little excerpt from a Carmelite Brother who lived in Parish in the 17th century, known as Brother Lawrence. In his last few days of his life when he knew he was dying, he penned these words under the title *Au Revoir*:

*Let all your employment be to know God. The more you actually know Him the more you will desire to know Him. Since knowledge is a measurement of love, the deeper and more intimate you are with Him, the greater will be your love for Him…*

God wants to be known, and wants humanity to know Him/Her. Not only in some abstract way – such as the awe or wonder we see in a beautiful skyscape, sunset or the many other delights that nature gifts us. God gives Himself in God’s son. Jesus of Nazareth.

But not everyone liked, or indeed likes, Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus walked the earth, he polarized people. Some people literally fell over themselves just to touch him. To hear his teachings, just to see Him. They recklessly left good jobs and careers to follow him through towns and villages and live with him. To hang on his every word. Just imagine what it would’ve been like to see a crippled back straightened, blind eyes seeing and three-day dead bodies exiting their tombs with their shrouds hanging off them. All they wanted to do was to know this man, follow this man. To be totally devoted to this man, to love him and to enjoy him.

We are all here because you too have responded in some way to Jesus saying to you, Follow Me. Know me. Read about my earthly walk, my teachings and my words and soak your self in them. But I’m not confined to the scriptures and history. Know me today, because death never claimed me. Talk to me and I whisper back today. Read words penned hundreds of years ago and I can reveal to you *now* how they can shape and mould your life if you follow me…

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When we marry, for example, we commit to invest in one each other in love. We commit to forsake all others, we commit (where at all possible) to love till the end of our days. Yet that commitment is only possible if we practice the disciplines that come with marriage and love. To make daily time for each other, to give priority, to uphold each other’s goals. On a day to day basis, we might practice disciplines such as talking with our partner, listening to them, sharing meals with them, perhaps occasionally challenging them, or at other times comforting them.

So too of course is our relationship with God. Each day, God loves to talk with us about what God desires for us, for God’s creation, for our brothers and sisters in the church or our brothers and sister *in potentia* who have not yet made a response to God’s good news.

One of the daily disciplines which I’d like to share with you this morning is one that we often don’t talk about that often. Penance; the act of confession of sins *and* absolution or confirmation of forgiveness.

The discipline of penance, for Christians, comes from our Jewish heritage. For the Israelites (and still practiced by Jews today) penance is practiced communally in the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur, based on Leviticus 23:26-28: 26 The Lord said to Moses, 27 "The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present an offering made to the Lord by fire. 28 Do no work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the Lord your God.’

While we don’t have the Day of Atonement, the practice of penance is strongly encouraged in the New Testament epistles such as in James 5:16:

**Therefore, make it your habit to confess your sins to one another and to pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.**

Today, penance is one of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches (it is not considered a sacrament in the Presbyterian Church). Confession is also seen as a “second baptism”, and is sometimes referred to as the "baptism of tears". It applies to the whole process of confession as well as absolution (although in some definitions, penance often refers to the ‘punishment’ side of confession i.e., what the confessant is asked to do as part of the forgiveness process).

In Orthodoxy, confession is seen as a means to procure better spiritual health and purity for Jesus. Confession does not involve only stating the sinful things a person does; the good things a person does or is considering doing are also discussed. The approach is holistic, examining the full life of the confessant.

Penance should never be viewed or used as tools of judgment or condemnation. In fact penance is quite the opposite. Penance is about the life cycle of spiritual growth and renewal. Just as winter comes and it seems that death and decay surround us. Leaves wither, fall and die. My roses are pruned back, the summer annuals disappear and our days grow short and cold. Even our very sun seems disinterested and moody.

Yet from this winter-death springs new life. In fact without this death there could be no new life. The pruning of the roses gives them new vigour and strength.

And it is the same in our spiritual lives. As Christians, we are pilgrims through spiritual mountains, valleys and seasons. In order to go to the next place, we often have to let go or die to where we’ve been. It goes back to the Jesus requirement to follow him:

**If you want to follow me, lay down your life, take up your cross daily, and follow me’**

**For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.**

God says Trust in Me, and our human nature says ‘No, I’ll trust in me.’ God says ‘Look to me for your daily bread’, and our human nature says ‘No, I’ll stock it up for a rainy day.’ God says Follow Me, but we often say ‘I think prefer following myself…’

Penance is the expression of spiritual growth. Of dying a little here, to gain life more here. Of moving from self-reliance to a deeper trust in God. Our spiritual growth and learning how to adopt and love this new and sometimes rather crazy family. Of dying to what is often our self-created bondage – the work of our hands, the idols we might invest in, or the habits we enslave ourselves too…to live in a Free, Loving and Peaceful relationship with our Creator. To gain life we have to lose our life. But if we do lose our life to Christ, then we will gain it anew – albeit of course we are changed – a new creation!

And as we journey through these valleys of shadows and fields of light, we grow in our ability to know and love God. We begin to see the world through the eye of God. We begin to think like God thinks. We act as a child of God acts.

I want to leave you again with the words of Brother Lawrence:

*Let all your employment be to know God. The more you actually know Him the more you will desire to know Him. Since knowledge is a measurement of love, the deeper and more intimate you are with Him, the greater will be your love for Him…*