

OBEYING THE CALL OF JESUS

Jesus said, 'follow me'. The man replied, 'let me first go and bury my father'. Jesus said, 'Leave the dead to bury their dead; you must go and announce the kingdom of God'. (Luke 9:59-60)

If each of us here this morning shared the stories of how we came to let Jesus into our life, it would be a fascinating sharing. And very, very varied. Some of us would say, 'well, He's always been in my life because my parents were Christian.' Some would say, 'yes, my parents were Christian too, but they were the problem; I had to leave them before I could find Jesus for myself'. Some would say, 'my parents told me nothing about Jesus. They had no religion and weren't too pleased when I discovered Jesus.' Others again may be saying, 'well, I'm still not sure I want to let Jesus into my life'. And all sorts of variations on these.

Now none of us are (or ever have been) quite in the position of the three people in this morning's Gospel: up front and personal with Jesus in the flesh, and thinking about following Him as He journeys dangerously to Jerusalem. True, Jesus does eventually invite us all to follow him. To journey with him. To be his disciples. But it's useful to ponder on this particular situation as Luke has described it.

Let's set the scene. Jesus is coming to the end of His ministry in the North of Palestine. He has taught and healed and exorcised and sent waves of hope through a society which is suffering and despairing and spiritually hungry. Yet by now He has been rejected by his home town Nazareth, and at least some of the towns of Galilee. He has been made unwelcome by the Samaritans. He knows He must go to Jerusalem, there to complete His ministry by proclaiming in that holy city, the coming of the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God, at the cost of His life. He still has a lot of followers, enough to send seventy two of them out to proclaim that Kingdom in other villages on the way.

The first man seems to have volunteered enthusiastically without being called. 'I'll follow you wherever you go!' Jesus certainly calls the second man. And He seems to have called the third man also. All three want to follow Jesus, though each in their own way. Let's note two things at this point:

- Jesus is no salesman trying to manipulate them into signing on the bottom line and close the deal as quickly as possible. He's no slick evangelist who proclaims only the **joys** of discipleship, makes a sale as it were, and then moves on, leaving his converts behind. Jesus's converts go with Him, and He looks ahead to what may happen to them as a result, and He points them to the implications of following Him. You could say Jesus believes in 'informed consent'.
- Jesus is nevertheless primarily focussed on His own call – to proclaim and bring in the Kingdom of God. That's the heart of His mission. And that mission includes calling people to quite radical discipleship. He wants as disciples only people who will share His own call and pay the cost. Yes, there will be blessings, but there will be a cost. Part of this cost is spelled out here:
 - Living with rejection on the edge of society, and sharing Jesus's homelessness
 - Subordinating all other relationships to the demands of the Kingdom – including precious family relationships

- Single-mindedness, not looking back

I'm struck by the simple pointedness of the way Jesus responds to each of the men.

To the first one, the enthusiast 'wherever you go I will go' – is it that he wants to be 'with the action'? One of the in-group embracing a new social movement? The idealism of youth? BUT, says Jesus, if you want to help change society, can you handle being on the margins, never fully at home in the society you want to see changed, and often on the move? That's where I am, says Jesus.

To the second one, Jesus has a tough response which we'll return to.

To the third one, who says I want first to say goodbye to the people at home – family, friends, neighbours – Jesus responds with a challenge: if you follow me, how single-minded will you be? Are you going to be always looking at what you've left behind, like a ploughman looking over his shoulder and making a mess of his furrow?

Those two responses are penetrating enough. But the response of Jesus to the second man, the one who wants to bury his father first, is a shocker. Compare it with the prophet Elijah's response to Elisha when Elisha asked 'let me first farewell my father and mother'. As we heard in our first lesson, Elijah gave him permission. But when Jesus calls someone who wants first to bury his father, what does Jesus say? *'Leave the [spiritually] dead to bury their [physically] dead; you must go and announce the kingdom of God'*. That final service to a father was a sacred duty - and surely remains so today. Yes, it may just be that the man's father was still hale and hearty and the man was using him as an excuse to evade the call of Jesus for years. 'I'll come and follow you once my father dies'. Some commentators try to soften Jesus's words. But whatever the exact circumstances here, Jesus is putting the claims of the Kingdom above family solidarity, and the following of Jesus above the duties of family. This is of a piece with what Jesus says elsewhere, even more unambiguously.

And there are two things lurking behind Jesus's call:

- Family, both nuclear and extended family, was the core unit of Jewish society in a way we individualist westerners do not grasp. And within that unit the father had an authority and responsibility far stronger than anything the men in **our** congregation are expected or allowed to exercise. So this is radical social disruption.
- Israel was 'the chosen people', in covenant with God. Membership of that chosen people came by birth into a Jewish family, not by individual adult choice. Jesus, however, was intent on re-creating Israel, a new or renewed Israel, out of the spiritually compromised generation around Him – the 'dead' he is referring to here. And He was calling individual adults to choose this membership for themselves.

Who has the right to make this sort of radical and socially disruptive call? All sorts of leaders and teachers over the centuries, religious and secular, have sought to do so, usually with disastrous effects sooner or later. And in the course of it all, so often they've made extravagant claims for themselves. And all too often they, we, have not walked the talk.

In the pages of the Gospels, we have the unique situation of the One, the only one, who **does** have the right, the authority, to make such an absolute call to personal discipleship; 'follow **me**': God incarnate in the person of Jesus. He is the One who goes on to model the cost of obeying the Divine call to the end; He is the One who walks with those who seek to

follow Him; He is the One who respects our freedom and yet who keeps calling us to a deeper more generous love first of Him and then of all those made in God's image. And He calls gently and yet almost ruthlessly.

Each of us receives that call, somehow, sometime, somewhere. Not in that completely unique way and time these people encountering Jesus heard it. Yes, down the Christian centuries and in our own lives we will all have known the tension, the complex tensions of choosing between family and Jesus. And sometimes it *is* a matter of either/or. But usually it is not. St Paul experienced the absoluteness of Christ's call on his life, yet counselled married Christian converts already married to a pagan to stay in their marriage with their spouse unless that spouse wanted out.

C.S Lewis wrestled with this call even within marriage between Christians. He wisely wrote, *'When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and instead of God, I shall be moving towards the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased.'*

We can easily transpose this principle to relationships between parents and adult children, and to the whole range of whanau relationships.

It really is a matter of 'seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you'. That Kingdom, that Reign, sometimes demands sacrifice of relationships, but again and again and again it, He, calls us not to abandon but to handle our existing relationships in a different way. After all, God invented marriage and family. And set alongside the times when Jesus subordinated the claims of the family to the claims of the Reign of God, Jesus affirmed marriage and strengthened it, and cherished children.

The way to go is always the way of love, led by the Holy Spirit. Discernment of what that way means in any particular situation needs honest self-knowledge, willingness to take counsel, careful and honest decisions, prayer – and humble trust in the goodness of the God we pray to.

I want to finish by quoting a lovely hymn by Colin Gibson, *Out of such sun and air*:

*Out of such sun and air
what Christ may come,
shining with new and lovely light
on our dim and shrouded lives;
stirring our sleepiness with dreams,
visions of life beyond compare.
Out of this sun and air
come, Christ, however you will come.*

*Out of such cloud and mist
what Christ may come,*

*Blurring the clear and simple lines
of our settled scheme of things;
calling on faith and hope and trust,
daring to danger, trial and risk.
Out of this cloud and mist
come Christ, however you will come.*

*Out of such sudden storm
what Christ may come,
sweeping across the startled sky
of our calm and peaceful ways;
driving with tempest winds of change,
testing with tumult and reform.
Out of this sudden storm
Come Christ, however you will come.*

May we learn to see Christ in every situation, large or small – sun and air, or cloud and mist, or sudden storm - whatever it is. And seeing Christ there, hear His call, whatever it is. May we learn to respond to that call with trust and with generosity. And in responding to that call, may we discover the perfect freedom which comes when we truly serve God and His Kingdom.

A sermon preached in the Anglican Parish of Eastbourne on 30 June 2019 by the Revd Canon Peter Stuart.