

Sunday 26th June

1 kings 19:15-16,19-end

galatians 5:1 , 13-25

Luke 9:51-end

No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.

As he so often does Jesus uses an agricultural image to illustrate an important truth. An image from the everyday world of his time, the world that was all around him. His hearers would have immediately grasped what he was saying. If you want to plough a straight furrow you must keep looking forwards, eyes fixed on something ahead. If you look back, its inevitable the straight line will deviate. (I heard a story once of a young farmer who heeded the advice of heading towards an object in the distance but who foolishly decided to focus on a cow in the next field which kept moving around of course!)

Jesus is talking here about following him. It's a theme that appears throughout the gospels. From that initial call on the lakeside to Peter and the others to follow him, through to the early church in the book of Acts where Christians were initially known as followers of the Way.

We often use the phrase being a disciple or Discipleship. But the word Following could also be used. They mean the same thing really. Interesting that the mark of a Christian is someone who follows of Jesus rather than someone who believes a certain set of doctrines. That's not of course to say that belief is unimportant – after all we declare what we believe each Sunday in our creed. What it does say is that we are people who are learning and progressing, people who are on a journey rather than people who have arrived. It's a bit like the words to Jesus of the father whose son was possessed by a spirit – I believe, help my unbelief. There is always more to learn, there is always further to travel on our journey of faith.

Today's gospel reading from Luke marks the start of a new section of the gospel as Luke tells it. A section which goes through to chapter 19 and contains a lot of teaching about what following Jesus is all about. Teaching largely in the form of parables – stories with meanings. Including some of the most well known ones – the lost sheep, the prodigal son, the good Samaritan.

And the section starts with the words “Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem”. In other words he begins his journey towards Jerusalem. A journey that would eventually lead to the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension – the fulfilment of his mission.

So Luke uses this journey of Jesus – and the things he does and says on the journey – to teach us about our journeys of faith – our following of Jesus, our discipleship.

We read first about Jesus and the disciples passing through the region of Samaria, and then move on to comments made to three people who wanted to follow Jesus. Its these I want to think about this morning. They can seem quite tough on first reading. Is Jesus trying to put people off from following him?

Well yes and no.

What he is trying to do is to make sure people realise that following him is not a picnic, not a way to health, wealth and security, not an easy journey. Remember at the start of the passage we read that Jesus had set his face towards Jerusalem. The journey to the betrayal, the arrest, trial and crucifixion had begun. Opposition was growing. Life would not be easy for him or for his followers. He needed to make sure that those who decided to follow knew what they were letting themselves in for.

So to the impetuous “I will follow you wherever” Jesus says “there’s no guarantee where you will end up if you follow me – it could be anywhere. Are you prepared for that?”

To the person who wants to bury his father first, Jesus makes the seemingly harsh comment that the dead should bury their own dead. Some say this means let the spiritually dead (those who are not following Jesus) do the burying. Others say that no one would be out talking to others – even Jesus - if their father had just died and lay at home unburied. So they suggest that the person really saying – my father is getting old. So let me wait until he has died before I follow you. And Jesus’ response is – no, this is something you have to decide now.

And lastly the request to say goodbye to those at home. It seems a reasonable request, but Jesus says that following him is a journey that involves looking and

moving forwards not backwards – and he uses the ploughing illustration. The very fact that this person is thinking about home and the need to say goodbye shows where their heart is.

What then are we supposed to make of these comments.

A couple of things to ponder on.

God's call on our lives – whether it's the first time we have heard that call, or whether we have been following for many years and hear him call us to do something new – will almost always be a call to stop doing one thing and do another. To look to the future rather than dwell in the past.

Our initial call to be a follower – that may have been many years ago – would have been to leave our life without God behind and walk with him into the future. But throughout our Christian lives we will be called to do new and different things, and we will need to leave some things – maybe things we love doing and are good at doing – we will need to leave them behind if we are to be faithful to the call.

Second that it won't always be easy. We are not called as Christians just to be a friendly gathering of like minded people – though I hope we are that in some ways – I am sure the first disciples were. Supporting and looking out for each other; praying for and helping each other. We are primarily called to follow Jesus. And now – just as in the time of Jesus – that will mean leading a life that has different values to the world around. And that will always bring tensions and challenges. The easy way to live in our culture is simply to fall in with all those around us. To be driven by some kind of self centred ideology rather than a Christ centred one. As those who follow Jesus we are called to travel against the flow which will always be hard.

Paul highlights the differences between a life following Jesus and one in tune with the culture all around in his letter to the Galatians that we read this morning. He compares life in the flesh (that's what he calls living according to the culture all around us) with the fruit of the spirit – the kinds of attributes that will naturally grow if God's spirit is within us and central to our lives. The important thing here is that they are fruits of God's spirit within us rather than things we struggle and strive for in our own strength.

Jesus doesn't promise that following him will be easy but he does promise that it will lead to fullness of life. Following Jesus will mean living as you were always supposed to live – in God's way. It will be the making of you as a person. It will be full of challenges but in following him you will become the person God always intended you to be. The real you.

You may have seen those adverts on TV for recruits to the navy. They don't show a life of ease where all is straightforward and hassle free, but they show a tough life with challenges where lessons are learned and skills gained. Where the old is left behind and the new is embraced. The adverts finish with a line like Michael – born in Blyth but made in the Royal Navy

Can we say about ourselves that wherever and whenever we were born, whatever our background, the true making of us has been as we follow Jesus.

Paul – born in Kent ; being made as I follow Jesus.