



Third Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 26 June 2022

READINGS

2 Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77: 1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5: 1, 13-25; Luke 9: 51-62.

Walking alongside Christ

I greet all our online worshippers in the name of our Saviour, and hope you will find yourselves closer to the God we all worship and adore.

There are two themes which we can pick up from today's readings. The first theme is that of a journey, and parallels to the Exodus can be drawn from the Old Testament book of Kings, and also in our Gospel reading. In the first reading, we see Elijah, knowing he was to leave the earth, travels to various places possibly to say farewell to the other prophets. He is followed by Elisha, his assistant who refuses to leave him, and follows him even through the parted river, and he witnesses Elijah's last minutes before he is taken up to the Promised land of heaven in a whirlwind. Jesus is en route to Jerusalem, the place where the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension will happen. We see little stories – the Samaritans who refuse hospitality, and the disciples who want to do as Elijah did and bring down fire to consume them. We see three people who want to follow Jesus, but are put off by what the journey will demand of them. To a lesser extent the Galatians passage speaks rather more of the result of our spiritual journey, and how, walking alongside Christ will result in certain very positive fruits, and not doing so will result in destructive lifestyles and a broken society.

However, since we are two weeks past Youth day and one week past Fathers' Day, it seems appropriate to continue the theme and look rather at the growth, mentoring and sense of passing on the faith that is present both overtly and by implication in these readings. It's a journey too, but rather a different one.

We heard last week about Elijah and his emotional and spiritual crisis while on Mount Horeb, and the still small voice of God, who recognized Elijah's depression and exhaustion. God gives him Elisha to follow him as prophet, and in today's Gospel, we see this Elisha, and quite a different man from his mentor! Feisty, in that he refuses to stay behind while Elijah goes around saying farewell to other prophets and refusing to leave him when he is about to be taken into heaven. Again, we have an Exodus image. Elijah hits the Jordan River with his cloak, and the waters part and the two of them cross over on dry land – as Moses did at the Red Sea. Elijah asks Elisha what he wants, and Elisha asks for "a double portion of your spirit". By this he means the Holy Spirit that has made Elijah the powerful prophet that he was. This sounds incredibly cheeky, but actually, in Jewish custom, when the father dies (and Elisha does all Elijah "father,") the father's possessions are divided up amongst the sons, but the oldest one always receives double portion. Elijah didn't promise Elisha anything but told him to look out for a sign, that of his witnessing Elijah's departing in the whirlwind. Elisha did witness it and after the ritualistic tearing of clothes, he took

up Elijah's cloak and proceeded to strike the Jordan River in the same way. The river parted, and Elisha's request was confirmed.

In the Gospel, Jesus' interaction with his disciples indicates how far they are from where he wants them to be, and one wonders if he worries that they will never be ready to carry his message after he is gone. Before today's reading, they are quarreling about which of them is the most advanced in the kingdom of heaven, and when we see today how they want to call down fire on the Samaritans who refuse them hospitality, Jesus refuses. They are so very "in this world" and looking for power and influence and wanting to cancel those who oppose them. Then we have the three who want to follow Jesus, the one who doesn't even comment when Jesus points out the rootless, homeless nature of his approach to ministry and discipleship, and the no-longer-wants-to-be disciple simply disappears. The second one is a good boy. In Middle Eastern tradition it is considered an honourable thing to look after parents until they have died. Now honouring your parents is one of the ten commandments, but does that mean hanging around at or near your home and not fulfilling what God calls you to because your parents will need you sometime in the next 20 years? And when the third would-be disciple wants to go and say goodbye to his family, he opens himself up to upsetting his mother who won't see him again, and being persuaded by Uncle to set himself up with a lot of money if he comes into his business for 10 years, then he will have the freedom and security to be as religious as he likes. Jesus is not prepared to wait, and his image of the plough illustrates this. You have to be focused and single-minded.

Compare these to Elisha, who when Elijah told him to "stay here" he refused and followed Elijah to the end. Compare this to the first disciples who left their nets and followed Jesus. A very different attitude, and one which Jesus still requires of us. If we look at the passage from Galatians, we all recognize the "fruits of the spirit." We tend to see them as a Google list of instructions – "9 things you need to do to be spiritually mature." Instead, they are a test to see whether or not God's spirit is within us or not.

Paul begins with the word "freedom." That's a favourite word in modern South Africa, and there are many beleaguered teachers and parents whose attempts at curbing delinquency are foiled by the accusation that "you are taking away my freedom." Looking at the list of the fruits of the lower nature, we can see the misuse of freedom in Christ. Rampant lustful sexuality. The impurity which means that people have no regard and no sense of their own repentance and humility before God. Wantonness, that is to give way to any impulse that looks like fun with no thought of the consequences or who is being hurt. Idolatry, worshipping our possessions, witchcraft, and later, drunkenness, which in this context is akin to addiction, and we all have our "can't say no to" things. And then there is all the hostility and fighting and jealousy and divisions and total lack of control. We recognize all of it, and even sometimes in church, such attitudes feature. We are not to be blamed if we despair of our world. We could see this as well in the disciples and those who wanted to be disciples. Other things were more important than following Jesus. In contrast, looking at the "fruits of the spirit", we have all been fortunate enough to meet those people who are close to saintliness. We often can't remember what they said or what they did, but the aura of holiness around them and the love emanating from them is something we never forget. And all the good fruits are evident in them so we are never afraid of their knowing our worst faults. We are met with total, accepting love, and we feel worm-like because we have let them down. And we all want those attractive fruits for ourselves.

Now how do we get there? Today's readings have one of the most important lessons. We get there by being totally dedicated to Jesus, and absolutely single-minded about following him. We believe that Jesus' way is the only way, and whatever we face day-to-day, we do it Jesus way whatever the cost. And boy, is there a cost! Ask any whistle blower, anyone who defends that human punch-bag that everyone has a go

at, or anyone who refuses to fill in false expense claims thus showing up the rest of the group – and the rest. We believe that Jesus' way is the only way, and we love with patience, with kindness, with that objectivity which allows us to make the stern, tough-love decisions which hurt so much but which bring about the growth so desperately needed. And we believe that Jesus' way is the only way, and this allows us to see that whatever good we do, it is through the grace of a Saviour who loves us and who has accepted us and accepted any gift we choose to give. And we will never lose sight of the fact of our own littleness, which is only made effective because we have a Saviour who loves us unconditionally and respects us and our choices and all the time longs for our company and friendship more than we will ever long for his. Only in this way will the door of this world be open to him, and his cleansing fire will sweep away the wickedness which we feel is part of our reality. But we go with people who don't want to give us hospitality, no comfortable bed to sleep in at night, no caring parents to give us their wisdom for the journey, and no friends to wish us well. Instead, like Elisha, we follow with everything we have got, and never take no for an answer, and ultimately, we will witness God working in the most wonderful way, if not through us, then in spite of us. let us put our hands to the plough, and never look back, and we will see little bits of the Kingdom of heaven beginning on earth through our efforts, and in the power of God's Holy Spirit.