

**SERMON FOR TRINITY 2 AT WINTERBOURNE STOKE (+ STEPHEN): 26-06-22 (based on 1 Kings 19: 15-16, 19-21; Gal. 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9: 51-62)**

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Recently, I went on a new walk with friends who were already familiar with it - what a pleasure it was to simply follow! The route involved a fairly steep climb, but the effort and aching muscles were worth the beautiful view at the top. Our readings today brought that walk to mind because of the themes running through them: being asked to follow on a journey away from the familiar; and the effort or sacrifice required to commit to that journey. During our lives, we may at times be called to lead, and at others to follow. In the reading from Kings, Elijah led and Elisha followed, until such time as he would take up the mantle as prophet himself. In Luke, Jesus led and his disciples followed, until they finally understood what was expected of them after Jesus' death and resurrection. And Paul's letter to the Galatians exhorts us to be led by the Holy Spirit away from selfish desires, and then to lead by example. As followers, we need to trust the teaching we receive from those we follow. We may also have to make some difficult choices, to step outside our comfort zones. Let's look more closely at what today's passages have to say on those themes.

Elisha certainly had a difficult choice to make when Elijah threw his mantle over him as he passed by. He understood that this prophet's cloak, a garment of distinction worn by kings and prophets, meant he was being called to be a spokesman of God. As Elijah's disciple, he was about to embark on a learning journey to give him the skills he would need after Elijah had been taken up in a chariot to heaven. That journey would involve turning his back on a steady source of income, on his family and friends. His request to kiss his parents farewell acknowledged that wrench. Elijah's somewhat enigmatic response - "what have I done to you?" - could be a rebuke, or simply a reminder that the call did not come from him, but from God. Elisha was to be accountable to God not Elijah. And indeed, Elisha does not hesitate to burn his bridges. The oxen, the plough and the yokes represented his past life, which he chose to swap for a new life of ministry. It was a message to family and friends that he had new goals and values, a determination not to look back. A commitment to discipleship requires a turning away from the world's priorities to God's.

Today's Gospel passage takes us to the section in Luke where Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem, whose gates he reaches 10 chapters later. It is a journey full of episodes that serve to teach, inspire and reveal God's purpose. There was a sense of urgency as Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem, determined and focused on his ultimate destination. It is likely that the Samaritans could see his clear resolve and did not wish to hold him up. The disciples, still learning, perceive the Samaritans' behaviour as a slight and want to see them punished. Jesus' refusal to allow that contrasts with the Old Testament prophets, including Elijah himself, who summoned divine fire to consume soldiers in 2 Kings.

As they walk on, they encounter three people expressing a desire to follow Jesus. This offers Jesus an opportunity to teach James and John something about the level of commitment that discipleship involves - and he does so with a hefty sprinkling of exaggeration. To the first person's apparently enthusiastic willingness to follow wherever he went, Jesus responds with a warning about the hardships that life with him on the road entails, including no permanent home. When the second person says he needs to bury his father first, Jesus' response about leaving the dead to bury the dead suggests he senses a lack of urgency and commitment. The third would-be disciple reminds us of Elisha in his request to say goodbye to his parents first. Jesus comes across as a bit hard, implying that now is not the time to be looking back. To look back while ploughing a furrow risks it becoming crooked. So, the message is clear - don't be put off your calling by distractions. Disciples are to be single-minded in purpose, setting their faces, like Jesus, on the task in hand. As with Elisha, taking up the call may well mean letting go of the past. So it is ironic that the disciples did exactly the opposite when, in John's Gospel, we are told they had resumed their previous occupation of fishing.....but not for long. When the Holy Spirit came to empower them, they in turn took up the mantle of leadership.

Which brings us on to Paul's letter to the Galatians, where the fruits of the Holy Spirit play a prominent role in our call to freedom, as Paul puts it. His reference to the yoke of slavery is a commentary on the law, that can result in not living by the most important of God's commandments: to "love your neighbour as yourself". Do that and the law is fulfilled. The call to freedom is

not, however, an excuse for self-indulgence, which itself is a form of slavery. But it does involve an internal examination of our motives, of what drives us. Self-interest is to be replaced by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control - easy to say, not so easy to achieve. I am reminded at this point of something I read recently that the French philosopher Rousseau wrote: "Virtue is a state of war, and to live it one always has some battle to wage against oneself". Gosh, how true. Freedom of the sort offered by discipleship involves internal struggles with some of our more basic instincts. But, it leaves us free to serve others through love, instead of seeing them as rivals in our desire for status, wealth or pleasure.

Much of what we have heard today speaks to the choices we make in the paths we follow through life and our actions on the way. Where pure self-interest is involved, the choice could well be wrong. The disciples learned from their mistakes, and so must we. In doing so, we in turn are in a position to lead others. For as a certain person said last Sunday at the Cathedral: "we're all responsible for growing disciples". And together, we can make that happen.

Bishop Stephen, our prayers are with you as you take up your predecessor's mantle and begin your own journey into new territory.

In the name of Christ, amen