

will you come and follow me?

a sermon preached on the
third sunday after pentecost

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by the reverend helen creed

the lections: 2 Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14; Ps 77; Gal 5: 1, 13-25; Luke 9: 51-62

Someone I know very well was brought up in a family formed out of good, hard-working, no-nonsense Presbyterian stock; and one of the sayings from this person's childhood, that looms large in his memory, is this one: "the road to hell is paved with good intentions" . . . in other words, "don't bring me your excuses, whatever they might be, don't ask me to commend you for thinking in the right direction – all those good intentions count for nothing, indeed, worse than nothing, if you don't match them with actions."

I do wonder if the person responsible for this delightfully sobering aphorism, might have spent a bit of time with today's gospel? It's not the most comfortable of passages, is it? The Jesus we meet in this text is not in the mood for taking any prisoners this day. Indeed, it's hard not to squirm *on behalf of* the three, un-named people who express the apparently good intention to "follow" Jesus on this road he is taking to Jerusalem. Where we might expect these three to be lauded for their commitment, we hear words from Jesus that at best could be described as forthright, but that also seem *just plain harsh*.

To the one who dares to say – "I will follow you *wherever* you go" – Jesus paints a vivid picture of what "wherever" will mean. No snugly hole in the earth, or safe nest up a tree for Jesus & his companions. The Son of Man is destined for a journey where there will be no rest, no place of comfort, "nowhere to lay his head" (apart, that is, from the cold stone in the tomb). . . it's not hard, is it, to imagine this person taking a moment to retract his offer!

Jesus' response to the one who says he will follow . . . but wants to "first . . . bury [my father]" – is strikingly brutal: "Let the dead bury their own dead". Remember this is a culture where the burial of the dead was, and is, of the highest priority. Indeed, for observant Jews, burying the dead takes "precedence over the most important of duties". According to biblical scholar Leon Morris, "it's more important to bury the dead than it is to study the law or to serve in the Temple or to kill the Passover sacrifice" (p.197 Morris). To not bury one's father is to dishonour him.

And then there is the one who says "I will follow you Lord", but "first" – what would seem a modest request – to "say farewell to those at my home." Again, this would-be follower's wish is met with complete lack of sympathy, Jesus going on to say that such a request makes this traveller not just a bit wishy-washy in his resolve, but actually "unfit" to be part of God's kingdom.

Are we squirming yet? Could this really be what it means to "follow" Jesus? Isn't it also okay, indeed imperative, that we attend to family needs, to our duties and responsibilities . . . to care for those whom God has entrusted to us? If the man on the road to Jerusalem is unfit to be part of the Kingdom, then where does that leave me? Maybe we should just move on to the next story, to next Sunday, and hope that Jesus' humour has been restored?

But no! let's gird our loins, and let's spend some time now trying to work out why Jesus speaks in the way he does this day.

One of the key ways that Luke presents Jesus in his gospel is as a-person-who-is-able-to-see-into-people's-hearts. My favourite story on this theme is the one where the woman who is a sinner is wiping Jesus' feet with her tears and her hair. Do you remember? The Pharisee hosting the dinner doesn't say anything out loud but his **thoughts** towards her are vicious. Jesus "sees" what he is thinking and rebukes in the most satisfying way.

I think something similar is going on here. These three people speak of their willingness to follow Jesus on the road, but Jesus sees something different beneath the words, and asks them to face their actual feelings.

In the one who says he will follow Jesus "wherever", Jesus sees a person who doesn't actually mean what he says – thus the vivid picture of the homelessness that will be his lot.

In the one who says he wants to first bury his father, Jesus sees someone who is looking for an excuse, rather than someone speaking out of a heart-felt calling. Thus the very clear words on following being about "[proclaiming] the Kingdom of God". Is that what you want to do, Jesus asks, with all it entails, or, not really in your heart of hearts?

And in the one who says he wants to say goodbye to his family, Jesus sees someone whose commitment is already on the wane. Yes, he's put his hand to the plough, he's declared his commitment to the work of the Kingdom, but there's a whole lot of other things on his mind as well. Thus the question about his "fitness", he's not actually caught up in the wonder of bringing the Kingdom to life.

My view is that the three harsh statements we find in this passage are designed to expose, to bring to the surface, what is really going on in the hearts of these three travellers. And **this**, not in order to condemn them, or to say their offerings are not up to scratch, but in order to provide a moment of clarity, and honesty, from which a new conversation might start.

What is clear to Jesus on this day, is that these three are backing away from the life that Jesus calls us to – a life that will include a fair amount of risk, of not knowing what is ahead, or how things will turn out, of walking forward in faith, of choosing to trust, even in the midst of what seems like a catastrophe; a life of vulnerability, of sometimes being at the mercy of the powers.

I think it would be true to say that most of us, and by "us" I mean "human beings" in general (not the people of St Johns in particular) . . . that most of us, quite a lot of the time, are reluctant to venture out with Jesus, reluctant to breathe in the bracing air of the coming kingdom. We like a bit of predictability, security, things working out the way we would like them to: we generally need to manage our risks carefully.

Jesus is intent on bringing us life in abundance; not life that **looks** abundant, but life that **actually is**; in other words – life experienced as generous and deep and full of hope. And the way to that abundant life is not on pavers of certainty and self-preservation; but on pavers marked by risk and vulnerability. That may not have great immediate appeal, but that's not the point: within the providential love of God, this is the way things are.

A few weeks ago I went to a conversation at St Oswald's in Glen Iris. It was between the vicar there, the Rev'd Glenn Loughrey, who spoke on indigenous spirituality, and John Bell, probably known best to us as a hymn-writer: he's from Iona in Scotland & he was talking about Celtic spirituality. It was a wonderful conversation, and I came away with lots of notes to ponder, but there is one that I'd like to

share with you this morning. John Bell spoke about the conversion of the early Celts to Christianity, through the witness of Saint Columba, among others. They lived precarious lives those early Celts – many babies & mums died in childbirth; the terrain was tough, and so was the weather; life expectancy was low and there were dangers every day. And what converted the Celts to Christianity, John Bell said, was the wonder of a God who took on the not insignificant risk of being born into this human world, a God who did not stand far off, but who came to us in the form of a vulnerable human baby who, actually, had a good chance of dying as an infant (what was the infant mortality rate at the time of Jesus?).

In other words, the Celts were won over NOT by the news of Jesus' redeeming work, but by the magnificence of the incarnation: of God taking on this very frail human flesh, flesh that has a very uncertain destiny a lot of the time.

I was very touched by that observation, and it crystallised something for me that I think is very relevant to our gospel today: that our faith in a noble human destiny, our hopes for a human community where love flows freely. . . *all these hopes depend not on anything we can do or be, but on a God who does not keep himself safe*; a God who *was, and is*, willing to risk everything in order to share the human story, and make us whole.

When Jesus challenges our three people on the road to Jerusalem, it's not "Do you have it in you to help build the kingdom?" but rather "Will you entrust yourself to the One who has risked all, who 'did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited' . . ." (Philippians 2:6)

And the question is the same for us, isn't it? Will you entrust yourself . . .? Everything depends on the answer we give to that question – the answer we give individually, the answer that we give as a community . . . It's a sobering thought, isn't it, that our answer to one question can mean so much, especially when we are so familiar with the waywardness of the human heart.

Mercifully, that question is not just posed once, but again and again – and again.

May God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, give us the will to follow the way of Jesus, a way where we will experience risk and vulnerability, but where we also might find what it is to be truly alive.

So, to the God who catches us making excuses, and who firmly, lovingly, truthfully asks us to face him, be all glory and praise.