

Trinity 2 [Proper 8 (C)]

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 14 July 2019

Readings: 1 Kings 19 vv 15-16 & 19-end and Luke 9 vv 51-end

Today's gospel reading doesn't make Jesus look like a very good recruiter. He's turning away willing volunteers! What's more, at first he seems to be discounting the value of home and family, the very things we hold most dear.

'The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' Does following Jesus really mean becoming rootless and homeless?

'Let the dead bury their own dead.' Could Jesus really be asking us to neglect our basic human instinct to honour our deceased?

'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.' Could Jesus really be saying that following him means not giving so much as a backward glance to the ones we love?

How different Jesus' admonitions seem from the story of Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kings 19. Elisha literally has his hands to the plough when Elijah calls him as a prophet by casting his mantle over him. Elisha does look back, and asks to kiss his parents goodbye. Elijah doesn't reprimand him, but allows him to return.

But look at how Elisha goes about his farewells: he slaughters his oxen, and burns the yoke and plough to cook his parting feast. What he is doing is sacrificing all the implements of his old life and career. He's bidding farewell not only to his family, but to his entire former role and identity.

Elisha understands that the prophet's mantle is not only a new garment, but a new life, calling, and identity. He grasps the total commitment involved in following the path of the Spirit, of walking in the way of the Lord.

Jesus is trying to convey to his followers a similar understanding of total commitment, and perhaps his stern-sounding words at first make it sound like the sort of commitment that is born out of a grim sense of obligation. Is Jesus' mantle really so much weightier than Elijah's that one cannot turn aside from following him even for a moment?

What at first sound like harsh rebukes, however, also turn out to be teaching moments about the nature of God's kingdom. As we look at the contrasts that Jesus draws, we will learn more about what Jesus is teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven.

The first key comes towards the end of today's gospel reading, where Jesus says, 'Let the dead bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' The kingdom of God is about abundant life – that is, life always new, life that transforms everything so that our old concerns are swept away. Not to be focused foremost on proclaiming the kingdom is to be like a dead person oneself. Setting out truly to follow Jesus, means leaving behind all fears; and that includes the fear of death.

Next, consider the words that make Jesus sound so much less flexible than Elijah: 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.' The kingdom, Jesus tells us, is not something we would ever turn aside from, if once we truly catch sight of it. Even the things in this life that seem most important and have the most

call on our attention will pale in contrast to the promise of a life infused with God's healing and grace.

Jesus also says, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' There is a restless energy in the kingdom of God, an energy that seeks constantly to make all things new. That energy sends people out with missionary zeal to all corners of the world, and it cannot simply be content to look inward towards a secure home.

If Jesus doesn't sound like a good recruiter, that's because he isn't just seeking a following *for himself*. Rather, he is seeking followers on the path that he himself is walking. That path can be hard indeed. It can keep us restlessly on the move; it can call us to a new life's work; it can lead us unflinchingly to death itself. And we cannot ignore that reality – that there are Christian martyrs in this generation, as there have been in every generation. Around the year 200, Tertullian, a theologian in the early Church in Carthage in north Africa, wrote that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'.

These hard statements of Jesus aren't rules demanding absolute obedience. Rather, in these words, Jesus pressing an example to an extreme, to show how important the principle is, to make us really think about where our ultimate and absolute priorities lie. Jesus shows us what radical discipleship *could* mean – and *does* mean for some in the world today. It is important to grasp that truth, even if we are not called to that particular expression of discipleship.

The path that leads to the kingdom of God is the way that leads to true life in fullness and abundance of the spirit. The fruit of the Holy Spirit, Paul tells us in the letter to the Galatians, is 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.' The psalmist sings to God that 'You will show me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.'

With that sort of path to look forward to, who can look back? If Christ calls, are we ready to sacrifice all for him?