

It takes a strong person to follow Jesus

Homily Trinity 2 Ordinary time by Canon Alison Tyler

1 Kings 19.15-16, 19-21

Galatians 5.1,13-25

Luke 9.51-end

Experience tells us that it takes a strong person to follow Jesus, a single minded and wholehearted person – just think how many times we get it wrong, it is only by following Jesus' year by year, practicing our faith, by walking in his footsteps, that we learn and become those strong people, single minded and wholehearted.

We have some clues in our readings today which show us how to become strong, single minded and wholehearted people. Firstly, we meet Elijah and Elisha, as Elijah begins to hand on his ministry, as a prophet, to Elisha. It comes after an immensely difficult time of threats and violence for Elijah, when though he is strong, committed and faithful he makes it clear to the Lord that he has had enough, so, maybe not surprisingly, one of the tasks God gives him is to anoint Elisha as his successor.

Now it strikes me that if Elijah goes into too much detail, Elisha will refuse the job, which as we already know is difficult, full of threats and violence, perhaps that's why so little is reported as having been said by either of them. Elijah throws his mantle over Elisha, who is ploughing, along with others, with a team of oxen. It is from this event that we get the expression 'of inheriting the mantle' of someone important when they die or move on to new things.

Elisha wanted to go and say goodbye, nothing much is recorded as being said between him and Elijah, but as measure of his acceptance of the task, he killed his team of oxen, cooked them and then fed those he was leaving – a farewell sacrificial meal as a decisive demonstration of his commitment to leave and follow Elijah.

Things could not now go back to how they were, so he left with Elijah, first as his servant and follower, but later as we shall hear in 2 Kings, when he was strong and ready, he would assume Elijah's mantle fully and it would be a perfect fit.

In the same way Jesus in Luke's gospel is described like this 'he set his face to go to Jerusalem' – he was firmly, and resolutely committed from the beginning of his journey, and like Elijah he has already had a difficult

time throughout his ministry. In this chapter of Luke alone, in the first 50 verses, he sends out the 12 on their first missionary journey, feeds the 5,000, is recognised as the Messiah, predicts his own death twice, warns the disciples and all who follow him that those who do follow him must deny themselves, and take up their cross daily, he participates in the Transfiguration, heals a demon possessed child, and deals with the argument about who will be the greatest in the kingdom – and that is all before we join in at verse 51.

So from the beginning both Elisha and Jesus are firmly committed to their mission and ministry, Jesus himself has already dealt with many difficulties and He knows that there will be more ahead.

The way to Jerusalem is the way to his death and Luke continually reminds of us this. Jesus's firm commitment in the face of the danger helps us to understand both the warnings he will give later to potential followers, and the demands for urgency and sacrifice that he will place on those who want to become his followers, it reflects his own acceptance of the risks he is running and the likely outcome.

In today's reading the Samaritan village will not offer Jesus and the disciples hospitality, not surprising really, because he is going to Jerusalem and there is a long history of bad relationships and mutual disrespect between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus though will not punish them as his disciples suggest, rather he shows his disciples a better way, to leave them untouched and go on somewhere else.

Then we read of his 3 brief encounters with potential followers, 'I will follow you wherever you go' says the first, and Jesus makes it clear he has nowhere in mind to offer him. It is a nomadic, wandering, uncertain life following Jesus.

Jesus calls the second person himself, but he wants first to bury his father, and Jesus apparently makes it clear that spreading the message of salvation is so urgent that even something so important and honourable must possibly be left undone.

Likewise, the last person is warned that it's an all or nothing commitment and that once you begin you can neither go back nor keep looking back.

There is an immediacy in these responses that we seem to have lost have today, following Jesus for us is more likely to be a commitment to study, prayer, social action fellowship or community building its not as urgent or as literal as stepping into Jesus's actual footprints was in those

early days.

All in all, then it's a long and dark journey Jesus has embarked on, It takes up most of the rest of the book more than another 15 chapters in Luke before the Crucifixion, having the kind of experiences, both joyous and difficult that will require single minded and dogged commitment and will develop the strength and persistence he will need when he gets to Jerusalem.

Paul, on the other hand in his letter to the Galatians is writing to new Gentile Christians beginning their faith journey, preparing them and encouraging them for their journey, to claim their freedom from the traditional Jewish law, and to make their place in the tradition just as teachers, evangelists and preachers today encourage us to join in the faith journey and make our places in the tradition.

Paul's teaching here is about the liberation of these new Christians, like us they are not Jewish, they are liberated by their faith from the requirements of the Jewish law and set free into the new life of Christ. So, Paul warns them not to get bogged down by fresh legalistic requirements. We too are baptised into that same freedom and new life and gifted with the same Holy Spirit. But it comes with a warning, it is freedom to love God and to serve one another, rather than unfettered and unlimited licence to do anything we might like.

Paul says here that the law is primarily love your neighbour as yourself, but Jesus himself in Matthew's gospel teaches us that the whole of the law is summed up in just two commandments, love God and love your neighbour as yourself'. It is real freedom then, to keep those commandments, to grow together to build together and to bring in the kingdom of God together that Jesus is offering and not just a licence for self-indulgence.

The list Paul gives of the desires of the flesh to be avoided includes 'fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these' - because these are all activities that weaken and undermine loving God and offering single minded and wholehearted service of others or following in the way of Jesus, because they are all largely wild and uncontrolled and so potentially negative and communally divisive, damaging the social fabric and threatening good relationships with neighbours.

Instead, Paul urges these young Christians, and us today to live in the power of the Spirit because 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' all of which will build up the community.

And like any church procession the most important one comes at the end of the list, because self-control makes all the others possible, and protects us all against the damaging effects of excess and self-indulgence. Self-control for example, enables us to love, to intend good things for others, to be joyful rather than hysterical, to seek peace rather than foster disagreement, to practice patience rather than losing control and so it goes on.

Genuine self-control protects us all against both self-indulgence and unhealthy repression.

As we said at the beginning it takes a strong person to follow Jesus, a single minded and wholehearted person, practiced in the skill of self-control.

Let us pray this week that we might indeed receive the gift of the Spirit and learn the self-control that we need to follow faithfully in the footsteps of Jesus. Amen