

## **Reflection for 26<sup>th</sup> June 2022 – Pentecost 3** by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

*Luke 9:57-62 - As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."*

As we begin to reflect on today's Gospel, let me ask a question which, hopefully, will help us to understand more clearly what Jesus is saying in what appears to be a sharp and uncompromising passage.

What is it that makes the difference between an excellent performer and a truly great one? Both will certainly have studied and practised for many years and probably from a very early age; both will be extremely gifted and skilful. So where is the difference? Being in the right place at the right time may well be one factor, but another more important ingredient is a sense of drive, a burning desire to reach the top, a desire which places getting to the top above everything else. It's about being willing to make hard choices: what comes first, career and ambition or family? To get right to the top is as much about attitude of mind, drive, and total commitment, as it is about skill or ability.

In the responses he gives to those who want to follow him Jesus reflects this idea. Each person asking a question is clearly well intentioned but has failed to realise the true nature of the demands that the Kingdom of God makes. It is a total and complete change of loyalty that must touch every aspect of their lives – the Kingdom of God must be first, not second or third.

Jesus, in this passage, is not saying anything he has not already said before; what he is doing is describing it in more graphic and clear terms. As the North American's might say – "this is where the rubber hits the road."

Think of his words earlier in chapter 9 *"If any wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."*

As we reflect on this passage, we need to be careful not to misunderstand what Jesus is saying. He is not, in principle, opposed to any of the things suggested to him. He is not attacking the need for those asking to care for their families and the situations put before him; they are important religious, social, and family obligations and must not be ignored. But the question he is asking is this: where does our commitment to God and the Kingdom of God fit in and around them? Is it what is first and foremost in their lives or just something to be fitted in when other things do not get in the way? To put another way; when the ways diverge, when there is a conflict of interest, which way do they go? What takes preference?

Return for a moment to the musician. If becoming a great concert performer is only a hobby or dream it will never happen. It must be the one driving and central focus of the musician's life.

When it comes to our own lives, how do Jesus' words touch and impact on us? Let's ask another question 'Suppose I hear God calling me towards a ministry which would see my income lower, my prospects more uncertain, and my standard of living drop? Would I be prepared to go in that direction?

For example - I know one clergy person who was called to a new ministry, accepted, and moved with his family thousands of miles - not knowing if the diocese he was joining would even exist in 12 months time due to a historical court case, the outcome of which was still to be determined.

What Jesus is saying here is that you cannot follow him either half-heartedly or conditionally - our commitment to Christ to the Kingdom of God must be total?

The statement He ends this conversation with is no accident, and pushes the point still further: *Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

For Jesus' hearers, who were far more familiar with the Old Testament than we are, that statement, coupled with the preceding question about saying goodbye to one's family, would certainly take their minds back to the call of Elisha by Elijah at the end of 1 Kings. Elisha asks for permission to say goodbye to his family before giving all he has to others, and following Elijah. *"So, he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was ploughing. ... Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." ... Then he set out and followed Elijah and became his servant.*

By making that connection, Jesus is in fact saying his hearers, following me is even more important than following the great prophet, Elijah; the commitment to Jesus must be total and nothing must get in the way.

Secondly, we also have the image of the old horse or donkey drawn plough. Today, at specialist agricultural events you can still see ploughing matches - competitions to see who can plough the straightest and truest furrow without modern electronic aids. Keep looking at where you have been or how your furrow compares with those produced by the other competitors and you will never win. To win you must keep looking forward. Allow your focus to be distracted and, almost inevitably the furrow will be more curved than straight. Jesus' point is the same, allow our focus and our commitment to him to be distracted and we too will find ourselves being pulled in all sorts of directions or, as St Paul might well put it, the enemy will be able to attack us with ease and lead us astray.

The challenge is for us to look again at our own discipleship and ask ourselves very seriously where our faith fits into our lives. Is it top of the agenda or simply what might be described as a hobby, filling in the space when everything else is done? Jesus' message, Jesus' call, is for total commitment and total focus on him.

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