



Sermon

I have decided to follow Jesus

Luke 9:51-62; 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

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Today's readings are around the theme of discipleship. What is a disciple? A disciple is one who learns from the teacher. It requires commitment and attention. It requires that we follow the ways of our teacher and learn to know his heart and motivation.

When I was in London I was being discipled by my vicar, Mike Clarkson. At first some of his ideas and ways seemed strange to me although I greatly admired him and his ministry. After some years, I suddenly realized I was starting to think like Mike. He was the speaker at a conference in Sweden and we were praying for people who came forward asking to receive spiritual gifts. I had just prayed for a woman who wanted the gift of wisdom. Without thinking, I said to her, "Now stay with us and pray for the next person so you can exercise the gift immediately." Hearing myself, I realized three things: that is what Mike would do; I would never have thought of it a few years before and it seemed normal now. I was thinking like my mentor. His ways had rubbed off on me.

So let's look at what is in the readings. Take the Old Testament reading: We picked up the story of Elijah the prophet last week. He was one of the great prophets of Israel who had a powerful ministry through a very difficult period of Israel's history. His name means "My God is Yahweh." After a huge conflict between the false religion which was taking over and Elijah representing Yahweh, he had a great victory. Last week, we heard that he had gone back to Mt Sinai where he met with God and was recommissioned as a prophet but also instructed to appoint two kings and a successor for himself.

Today we heard the story of the call of Elisha. His name means "My God is Salvation." Elisha was ploughing with oxen when Elijah came up to him and took off his cloak and threw it over him. Now the way Elijah dressed was virtually a uniform for a prophet. Taking his cloak and putting it over Elisha was a sign that Elisha was being called to be a prophet too. Certainly, Elisha understood it that way and he ran after Elijah and said he would say farewell to his parents and then follow him.

This was a courageous decision. Elijah had been hunted for years and the queen had sworn to kill him. His disciple was certain to be threatened too. Furthermore, Elisha was from a wealthy family having twelve pairs of oxen for ploughing. The life of a wandering prophet would not be as comfortable or well off. Elijah makes an odd reply, "What have I done to you?" Perhaps meaning, 'It's nothing to do with me - this is between God and you.' Since God had told Elijah to call Elisha it is likely that God had already been dealing with Elisha.

Elisha makes a thorough job of leaving. He kills the oxen and chops up the plough, burns it and cooks the oxen as a farewell feast. To mix metaphors he is burning his bridges – there will be no going back to the old life.

When we follow Jesus, we don't normally have a major change of job but there is a major change of loyalty and that is to be a new direction in life with no turning back.

In the gospel passage we come across the Samaritans. There was ill feeling between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans lived in the central part of Israel. They were descendants of Jews who had intermarried with other peoples which was forbidden in the Jewish Law. There was also a tradition that under the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom, some of the Jews formerly there had been deported elsewhere in the Empire and other people brought to Northern Israel to live. These people had partially accepted the Law of Moses but missed it with their former religion.

When Jesus chose to travel through Samaria to get to Jerusalem, he was rejected by them simply because he was heading for Jerusalem. Out of this hostility we hear the James and John asking him to call down fire from heaven on the village because it had rejected Jesus. In Mark's gospel we are told that Jesus had nicknamed them the sons of thunder. It could also be rendered sons of loud shouts – maybe passionate ones.

Well they are certainly passionate in this case. But why would they have thought of such a thing? They now knew that Jesus was the Messiah and had inklings that he was God. It would be a terrible thing to reject the Messiah let alone God in person. And there was a time when Elijah the prophet was threatened with death by an angry king who sent troops to arrest him. He had called down fire in self-protection. But with Elijah, the Angel of Lord spoke to him and told him not to fear but that he could go with the soldiers and be safe. So, with the disciples, the Lord tells them not to think that way and they went on to another village. They might have remembered that he had already instructed that if they were not welcomed in a village they were to shake the dust off their sandals and move on¹. A footnote in the Passion Translation says of that practice:

Shaking the dust off their feet would be a statement ... that the messengers would not be responsible for their fate. ... [It] did not mean they were to stomp off offended and angry, but that they would move on with no defilement or unforgiveness in their hearts toward those who rejected their message. If they did not do that, they would take the "dust" of that offense to the next place they ministered.

Then we are told about three men faced with the decision to follow Jesus. At that time and place it would mean leaving home and family and travelling around the country with him.

Perhaps in contrast to the Samaritans who were offended because Jesus was going to Jerusalem, Luke tells us of a man who met Jesus and asked to be his disciple – no matter where he was going! Jesus warned him that it was not an easy life following him. He was a travelling Rabbi and there was no home to rest in. When we follow Jesus it won't be all comfort. There are sacrifices to be made – do we want to follow him?

Then it is Jesus calling someone to follow him², but the response is "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." That sounds reasonable doesn't it? But don't imagine that his father was dead with the funeral imminent. He meant that he would stay with his father until one day in the future he died. Jesus responded by contrasting our being spiritually alive or dead. If you are spiritually alive (born again) and called by Jesus into Kingdom ministry, you need to get on with that. Let those who are spiritually dead look after the spiritually dead. In other words, this Kingdom is of highest importance.

Next Luke tells us about a man who said to Jesus that he would follow him but first he had to say goodbye to his family. Jesus said, "No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

It's an obvious reference to the call of Elisha. But he has switched the ploughing to be the work of the kingdom rather than the normal work of farming as it was for Elisha. When you plough a furrow if you don't look where you are going, the plough goes off course – just like driving a car when you look down at the audio system for too long and you find the car is veering to the left, or when you are throwing a ball it goes where you are

¹ Luke 9:5

² Luke 9:59

looking. So Jesus says when you start on Kingdom service you need to be wholehearted and focused – not distracted by other concerns.

So where are we with this discipleship? Are we living as disciples of Jesus? Do you realise that there are costs to following him? We have to give up some things we would like to do. When we enter into the Lord's service – and I am not just talking about ordination but as any follower of Jesus – when we enter his service we have to obey him. There is a morality to follow; there are some things we are not to do any longer; there are other things we are to do now which we would not have thought of doing before. Yet as the old prayer says it, his service is perfect freedom. It is in obedience to his ways and will that we find true freedom.

Where are we in discipleship? Who comes first – our families or the Lord? Jesus has the first call on our lives. That is a cost and we may be misunderstood. That doesn't mean we avoid family responsibilities but when it is a genuine conflict (rather than a selfish excuse) he has to come first. When Helen and I were staying on in England, of course there was a cost in terms of not being with our families. My mother said to me, if God is calling you to stay you must do it, but if we want you back here. We were called to stay for those years and happily as a Christian she understood the priority of that call.

Elisha shows us that the response of discipleship is wholehearted and there is no going back. We are not to look back once we determine to follow Jesus. Elisha burnt his plough and killed the oxen (which probably didn't please his father). He showed that he would not go back. And as he followed the call of Yahweh, he became a more powerful prophet than his mentor Elijah. He worked twice as many miracles. Elijah pointed to the true God – "My God is Yahweh"; Elisha pointed to salvation in God: "My God is Salvation." The ministry of Elijah followed by Elisha forms a type or preview of the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus. John prepared the people for Jesus who is our salvation.

Will you be his faithful disciple?