

Hand to the Plough

Second Sunday after Pentecost (OS 13C)

Published in the Ministry District of Yorke Peninsula

Sunday, June 26, 2022

Our Gospel passage this morning begins with the words, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." In order to understand this gospel, we needed to recognise its structure and theme: "Jesus on the journey to Jerusalem". It was a journey of destiny, a journey of purpose. A Journey that Jesus had to make.

Today, as we begin to head for Jerusalem, we are invited by Luke to consider Jesus travelling companions. We are focusing on those who will travel with him. Let me begin by analysing the characters. First there are Jesus two disciples, James and John.... Then there is a person who would like to come. Then another whom Jesus calls but has other matters to attend and finally, the one who would like to come, but his coming is conditional. He must have the opportunity to say goodbye. The reading closes with the harsh words: "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Although the text implies that they apply just to the last exchange, they neatly sum up the whole passage. So let us begin at the end.

Perhaps this is one of the cases where the image used by Jesus has lost its meaning in our culture. It might surprise you, but I have actually ploughed a paddock, but like most of my generation - well you connect the plough to the tractor, get into the cabin, start it up and away you go. It was only when we had the World Ploughing Championships at Illawarra in the early eighties that I had the opportunity to see a hand plough in action. The essence of the use of a hand plough is the struggle to get an even straight furrow. The animal provides the motive or pulling power, but the hand of the farmer walking behind will determine the depth and quality of the furrow. His downward pressure keeps the plough in the ground doing what it ought. Turning over the soil. Now the strangest thing happens if he turns to look behind. That very action lifts the plough from the ground and stops it from doing its job. All who heard Jesus' words they would have known that the farmer must keep focussed on the task at hand or their work is useless. The quickest way to sabotage the ploughing was to look back at where you had been. Jesus in these words reminds us that our eyes must be fixed on the goal or else our work would not be of any value. We will have laboured but there will be no harvest.

Before we look at Jesus' disciples, let us first look at the three persons that Jesus rejected.

The first seemed keen enough - I will follow you wherever you go he said, but Jesus looked at him and said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." We don't know the circumstances, but perhaps this was a happy looking band of pilgrims accompanying Jesus, and this seemed an attractive alternative to the farm and the drudgery of it. Like the children wanting to run away and join the circus, perhaps this person could only see the glamour. Jesus warns him of the cost. The itinerant life had few luxuries, and required the participant to give away even the security of a place to call home.

To the second, Jesus confronted him with the invitation, "follow me". The idea was attractive, but this person wanted to go back to his family home and bury his father. Now I must admit that as a young child, I had the vision of Dad laid out in the coffin, ready to be buried, but this is not what is meant. To bury his father, was the son's duty. He was not speaking of an immediate task, but rather the task that one must perform some time as part

of his familial duty. He would be free to come then.

The third would come, but wanted to say goodbye at home. Perhaps this sounds a reasonable request, but is it? To go home implied the asking of permission. It implied an uncertainty in following that would need to be confirmed by those at home.

These three potential disciples did not make the grade, because the first wanted to follow in comfort, the second wanted to delay and the third wanted to turn back. But these are not the only ones in the passage. No one could question the desire of James and John to follow Jesus. They had done so at great cost. But there is something important here in the story that precedes the story of the would-be disciples. Jesus has cause to rebuke those who had chosen the way of discipleship as well.

Let us think for a moment about the circumstance. Jesus was heading for Jerusalem, through Samaria, and knowing that he was going as a Jew to the Jewish capital, he was rejected by one Samaritan village. (Is this surprising?) Jesus was engaging with their bitter enemy - how could he still be considered a friend? How could he expect their hospitality? When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" This is a natural reaction to this insult. After all, they were with Jesus, God's great teacher.

But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

You see James and John had also missed the point of the Kingdom - It wasn't about prestige. It wasn't about power, but the subtle gentleness of the love of God. The love that called the followers to face abuse, to face criticism, to face homelessness and rejection.

What about us? Where are we in the process? Are we still would be disciples?

Are we held back, because the call that has come, will require us to give up our security. We may not be asked to be homeless, but we might need to give up the security of a good paying job, or a nice house or even move away from our family and friends.

Or are we going to follow, but in our own time. Have we heard the call, but put it on hold until the timing suits us. Are we clinging to a past agenda, a previous timetable and delaying the call till it suits us.

Or are we following looking back all the time to the way things might have been. Are we bitter about the loss of income or prestige or the family things that our calling has taken us away from, or are we using these to stop us coming whole-heartedly after our Lord?

Or perhaps like James and John we are following our calling, but we have allowed ourselves to be fooled by our own importance. Are we so busy insisting on our own way, that we have lost sight of Jesus, Lost sight of the Kingdom, lost sight of the love of God and the purpose and meaning of his calling.

The Gospels are the recording of the words and actions of Jesus, but they are more than just an historical record. These things are written that they might speak to us across the centuries, conveying eternal truths. Let us look at this Scripture and reflect upon it in our own lives. The call is clear, we are to follow our Lord, but have we taken it up on his terms or ours. For unless we surrender to him - we cannot be counted as his disciples.

Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

AMEN