

Luke 9:51-62

9:51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

9:52 And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him;

9:53 but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

9:54 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?"

9:55 But he turned and rebuked them.

9:56 Then they went on to another village.

9:57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

9:58 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

9:59 To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

9:60 But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

9:61 Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home."

9:62 Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

One of the good things about preparing sermons or Bible Studies or teachings is the way I am challenged so much myself by what God has to say to me through the material I am preparing. Today's Gospel passage was definitely a very challenging one.

It starts with Jesus determination to head to Jerusalem, to enter into his destiny, to face up to his certain death and to begin his journey back to the Father. He decides to go from the region of Galilee straight towards Jerusalem which means going through Samaria. He sent people ahead of him to prepare some accommodation along the way. But the first town they try wasn't prepared to receive him because he was on his way to Jerusalem. You'll remember from Jesus conversation with the Samaritan woman recounted in John's gospel that Samaritans did not worship at Jerusalem so this seemingly enough for them to refuse him a place to stay. This so angers his disciples James and John that they ask if they can call on God's power to destroy the town. After all Elijah, for example, had commanded fire like that before. But Jesus rebukes them. The Old Testament patterns no longer apply - they should already know that. After all they have heard the sermon on the mount about how to love their enemies. And they have already been sent out to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom and told Jesus' evangelistic technique - go to where you are welcome and don't bother with the rest. They had shaken off their feet the dust of places that had not welcomed them. But they were incensed by a town not receiving Jesus their Master. Just think about how you feel toward those who oppose the spread of the gospel. This incident shows us an important lesson for us as Jesus's disciples - Discipleship is not about zealous punishment of those who reject Jesus and his mission. We are not to seek judgement against people - only God judges - and he has far more patience than us. Later on as the gospel spread people in this region of Samaria did receive the good news. Meanwhile Jesus showed his perseverance despite opposition - they went on to another village.

Then there are three stories of encounters Jesus has with people who want to follow him. As Jesus goes about preaching and demonstrating the good news of God's Kingdom there are a lot of people attracted to him. They naturally want to respond to him. Some are inspired to consider following him. The first one is really enthusiastic. "I will follow you wherever you go", he says. Jesus comes back to him with a part of a common saying which gets across the point that he doesn't even have a house, a place to live, even as much as the animals have. A house gives protection against the weather, against other threats, providing security, possibly displaying wealth. All these things are not part of what Jesus is calling his followers to. Jesus was calling this potential follower to sacrifice his security to follow Jesus on his mission. We don't know how he responded. But think of what is your security. What affords you protection against the things in your life that are potential threats? Material security is not guaranteed for a follower of Jesus. This is a sacrifice we may end up making if we follow Jesus.

In the second encounter Jesus asks someone to follow him. The man replies, "Yes, but..." The 'but' is probably the best one anyone could come up with at that time. For a son, burying his father was an obligation, a duty, that everyone would think was of great importance. It didn't just involve a quick funeral either. After days of mourning there was still the obligation to dig up the bones after a year and put them in a special box (ossuary) so he may have been saying he had to do his family duty for the next year first! Jesus reply is very strong - let

those who are spiritually dead bury the physically dead - following Jesus is more important than customary family and society obligations. The Kingdom of God needs to be proclaimed more than these need to be done (not necessarily instead of these things).

Then another responds to Jesus with a promise to follow - BUT wants to put something else first - the once again reasonable request to say farewell to those at home first. The way he says it shows that doing what Jesus wants is not quite the first priority. And surely following Jesus means doing what he has for us to do (which may include family care as well of course). As Jesus puts it when you decide to plough a field you have to look at where you are going to produce straight furrows next to each other (with animals not with tractors). When we decide to follow Jesus in proclaiming the Kingdom of God we have to be putting that first, not second to anything from our former life. A decision to follow Jesus requires that commitment.

Today's gospel passage speaks to us about several aspects of following Jesus. We've been following the story of Jesus's death, resurrection, ascension and the coming of God's Holy Spirit over the last few months. Through those we know that Jesus has died to enable us to be with God, that he rose with the same power available to us, that he is with God interceding for us even now and that His Spirit is within us - all of which is essential for us to be able to follow him at all. At the time of today's account Jesus was heading very clearly to the cross, to Jerusalem. That was his destiny - his mission for the world - then. Now Jesus's mission to the world is through his disciples, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. If we are to follow him now we will undertake his mission to the world with the same approach to those who don't receive him as he required of his disciples. We will follow Him on his mission to the world with the same preparedness to sacrifice our security, the same commitment to put him first, that he required of his followers then. Jesus doesn't want hard-hearted or half-hearted disciples. And he has given us everything we need to be able to follow him in his mission to the world. Praise God and that is what we will do now, putting him first in worship.