

Sermon for Sunday 26 June 2022 – Second Sunday after Trinity

1 Kings 19.15-16,19-end; Galatians 5.1,13-25; Luke 9.51-end

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Father, come by the power of your Holy Spirit. Open your written words to our hearts and minds that we might encounter your living word, we pray in Jesus name. Amen. Please do be seated, and it may be helpful, or it may not, to take your pew sheet; I'll just give you a moment - in our second reading, the reading from Galatians, to find about a couple of inches down, because we don't have the verses noted, the words 'live by the Spirit, I say and do not gratify the desires of the flesh' and just have a mark there. We'll come back to that in a moment.

Our gospel reading starts at a pivot point in Luke's account of Jesus' earthly life and ministry. So when Luke puts it, the days, or the time, drew near for him to be taken up. Remember that the Ascension is for Luke, the climax of his Gospel, and the pivot point between Luke and Acts; and Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem at this turning point. His itinerant teaching and healing so far has been around Galilee; it culminates a few sections before we read this morning in the Transfiguration, and now his focus is on that journey to Jerusalem, towards his crucifixion, his burial, resurrection and ascension. And the passage that we read had echoes of the account of the prophet Elijah that we heard from the Old Testament and also some bits before the account that we heard; before what we heard this morning of Elijah and Elisha, Elijah has had a showdown with the prophets of Baal and he has called down fire and he subsequently killed the prophets, so we could have some sympathy with James and John thinking that they should do the same when Jesus was rejected by the Samaritans. But Jesus' way is different, it's a way of nonviolence in contrast to Elijah.

Just as a side, I'd make the point that just because something is in our Bible doesn't mean it is right and something that we have to follow. It may well be there as a negative example.

And simply we have echoes of the call of Elisha to follow Elijah in the encounters between Jesus and three would-be disciples. Elisha asked to go to say goodbye to his relatives and Elijah permits it. But when a would-be disciple a similar things, Jesus says no. And, of course, we have the reference to ploughs. In both our Old Testament reading, as Elisha severs his links to his existing life by killing his oxen and burning the ploughing equipment so that he can no longer continue in agriculture, but can only go and follow Elijah; our gospel reading, Jesus simply makes it difficult for people to follow him. It is an all or nothing commitment, and it's this concept, having just looked back, it's this concept of following that I want to explore this morning.

Two of the would-be disciples say they will follow Jesus. The other is approached by Jesus with the challenge to follow him. Now disciples would follow their rabbi or their teacher, literally. As the rabbi walked around, the disciples would walk behind. I deliberately came up into the pulpit this morning because otherwise I would be demonstrating it by walking the length of the aisle and it'd be like a game of tennis as you watched me doing this. [shakes head]

But the closer a disciple walked to their rabbi the more dust was kicked up. You could tell the disciples that were closest to their rabbi - they had more dust on their tunic and some scholars say that rabbis even modified their sandals, so they kicked up more dust, and their disciples would get dustier and look better disciples than disciples of other rabbis. But the disciples walked in the steps of their teachers. This is what Paul is saying in our reading to the young church in Galatia.

He uses this imagery of following, of walking in the steps. To put that reading into context then, you might want to have your pew sheet to hand. The Galatians had come to faith in Jesus Christ as a result of Paul talking to them about the grace of the Gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection, how it didn't need law and a right way of doing things to be acceptable to God. But they've been listening to another teacher and other teachers who said no, no, you've got to be under law, you've got to follow the Jewish law, you've got to be circumcised and follow the rest of the law. And Paul is having none of it - it's worth reading the whole of the book of Galatians; it's just five chapters, you'll do it in 15 minutes, and see Paul just unfold his argument. But having laid his arguments, Paul appealed to the Galatians to walk by the Spirit.

And the section that I've asked you to home in on - live by the Spirit. He starts by saying walk by the Spirit. He then says that the spirit supplants or displaces the flesh, that if we're led by Spirit we're not under law. Then he outlines the works of the flesh, what was known as a vice list and note that that is not a closed list. Yes, there's a list that says and things like this and then in contrast we have the fruit of the Spirit which is a virtue list and again, it's not a closed list.

And then as Paul writes in beautiful literary style, he's come up, he's said walk by the Spirit, the Spirit displaces the flesh, you're led by the Spirit, you're not under law. The works of the flesh contrast with works of the Spirit - it almost comes down the hill the other side. But there's no law against the fruit of the Spirit. The flesh has been crucified, it's dead.

And then at the end of our reading, to walk by the Spirit. Let me give you an illustration; driving - those of you who drive, many of you will, if you don't drive, you will know drivers. Now, a considerate driver will, by their very nature, read the situation and decide whether or not they should go 20 miles an hour, 30 miles an hour, or whether they should give plenty of room as they go round past the cyclist. That's the considerate driver. An inconsiderate driver thinks that they can just do what they want and drive at the speed that they want, and they can go past a cyclist with minimal distance, as I have this morning on the way to Lavenham - as I come around the corner, a very inconsiderate driver is virtually driving a cyclist into the ditch.

Now, we have laws. We have circular signs with a little red ring with a number in them - 30, 40 - that constrains us by law to a speed limit. Or those of you that are up-to-date with changes in the Highway Code, we now have to pass cyclists with a minimum distance of 1.5 metres. But those laws are there to constrain those who otherwise would not drive considerately. I'd make a note, just because a driver keeps to the speed limit because of the law, they don't necessarily turn into a considerate driver.

Paul appeals to the Galatians. He appeals to them by saying, your flesh, your desires, in this case, not your human body, your sinful desires are dead. They've been crucified with Christ. But being a good pastor, Paul knows that the realistic picture is that those desires and impulses still arise and need addressing in believers' lives. So he says, 'walk by the spirit'. You may wonder what the crazy curate has done with these footsteps down the aisle. And you may notice that the words are slightly different to our reading - our reading says, 'Live by the Spirit, do not gratify the desires of the flesh'. Better translated 'walk around' - the word is peripheral. Won't take many guesses to realise it's where we get our word peripatetic from - walk around by the spirit, and then, by way of emphasis, using a double negative, no way will you fulfil the flesh's desires.

A better way of translating it, or a different way, would be this - o this is what I'm saying; as you walk by the Spirit, or if you walk by the spirit, there's no way that you'll fulfil the flesh's desires; they're incompatible. As a friend of mine once said, if you're doing the do's, you don't have time or inclination to do the don'ts. Paul here is appealing not to law but to grace. He's appealing to the Galatians, saying, your flesh has been crucified with Christ. You no longer have to live to those desires, you now have the freedom to live by the Spirit.

At the end of our reading from Galatians, he wraps it up by saying, if we live by the Spirit - and it's not a question, he's assuming it's **since** we live by the spirit, let us be guided. And again, Paul, the word here that's translated guiding, is again 'to walk'. To walk in the steps of the Spirit. To walk in order or in step with. Jesus calls disciples to follow, to go on a journey with him, to walk in his footsteps.

I'm just going to leave us with a question today. Today, as we are called to follow Jesus by walking in the way of the Spirit, how might that look for each of us as individuals, or together as a community of followers of Jesus? What would it look like, if like those would-be disciples that Jesus challenged to make a total commitment to following him, without distraction, without first doing something else, what would that look like? It may look different for each one of us. But brothers and sisters, can I encourage you to listen to the Spirit, to stretch the metaphor, to look at where the Spirit is walking and where the Spirit might lead us. Amen.