

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 13 Year C 2019

One of the great lessons of life is to accept the hard truths that need to be said to us from time to time. We live in a world of excess where for so many balance has been lost. The natural equilibrium which keeps us healthy and sane is constantly under threat. We recognise - too late for too many - the cost of indulging in too many cigarettes, too much fatty food, too much drink, too much processed food, not enough exercise, too much work. And not only our bodies suffer. Our minds and our relationships can suffer too! And so, all too often now, as we sit in the doctor's room *hard truths* are spoken to us: *if you want us to help you, you must cut back; you must get more active; you must stop this habit/addiction/behaviour completely or it will kill you....* Hard words to hear, especially after a lifetime of ingrained habit. Harder still to respond. But we need to hear the hard words *so that we might live well*. Not just survive, but to live well...

The Gospel we encounter today has some hard words/hard truths as well. *The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head; leave the dead to bury their dead; no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God*. What we hear from Luke today is part of what we can rightly call 'the hard sayings of Jesus' - a body of material in the Gospels which seek to shake us; little sayings which carry a mighty punch! And they are sayings, which, if we are honest with ourselves, make us shift uncomfortably in our seats: *love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you; go sell all you have and give your money to the poor; forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; take up your cross daily and come follow me....*

Now there are trends in some circles to try and spiritualise all these sayings. Or worse, to say 'they don't apply to me', or that they apply only to some people. Perhaps... But the reason we maintain a canon of Scripture is because we believe it *continues* to speak to us today. And every story and every word is there to convey a meaning and a truth. And whether we reject them or not, we must struggle with them! Not gloss over them. Not to pretend they're not there. Not to skip over to the next, more attractive story. No. These hard saying, these tough truths, need to be confronted head on and wrestled with...

Now, amongst the hardest words within our faith tradition are those dealing with sin and judgement. We have seen how that hits a nerve in the whole Israel Falau saga. Whether you agree with his stance or not - and notwithstanding that the Instagram post that got him in hot water *is not* in fact a quotation from the bible, and that he can exercise a very full Christian faith without ever posting anything on Instagram - we can't just wish ideas of sin and judgment away. They are hard words & we need to wrestle with them.

If nothing else the hard sayings in the gospel today confirm the cost of being a disciple. If you want it easy, find another religion! The Gospels themselves do not hesitate to tell us again and again of people – good and well-meaning people – who fall away when *the true cost* of following Jesus is revealed. And the true cost comes clear when we turn our gaze and look towards Calvary. That, my friends, is the interpretative lens, through which we judge and assess these sayings. And which, if we dare, judge and assess our own lives.

Up to this point in Luke's Gospel the healing, teaching and preaching ministry of Jesus has been restricted to his home district of Galilee. But today we witness a turning point. It is a turning point in Jesus' journey which not only helps us unlock the hard sayings we encounter today, but also unlocks *the entire story* that stretches from the Annunciation at the beginning of the Gospel to Paul's imprisonment in Rome at the end of Acts. And *this* is the key, the turning point of Luke's entire two volume narrative: *Jesus resolutely took the road for Jerusalem*. This one verse is *central* to the way Luke has put his entire work together. *Jerusalem* now becomes the focus for Jesus' ministry. The *geographic hinge* in the story of Jesus' journey indicates nothing less than our *spiritual hinge*. Christ journeys to Jerusalem. And from Jerusalem the good news will go out. The Cross stands at the centre.

If we imagine we can sustain the life of faith simply because we like it, or because it is fun, or because we enjoy catching up with people we like, that there's just something nice about it all, because it makes feel good, or happy, or even peaceful, then I am afraid it is not a faith that will not sustain us. It will be a faith which all too readily overlooks the hard sayings of Jesus.

It will misrepresent Our Lord and will communicate a Gospel that is false. We serve a crucified Lord who *resolutely set his face toward Jerusalem*.

To emphasize this cost of discipleship Luke skilfully places the portion we hear today just after his account of the Transfiguration. Christ appears in glory alongside Moses and Elijah. So, Luke intends for us to take *that* image as we come to Gospel today. When we hear *The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head; leave the dead to bury their dead; no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God* they are in fact echoes of the Elijah story which helpfully we hear in the first reading today. Elisha is the one chosen to succeed Elijah. But today we hear how the apprentice prophet is allowed not only to turn back, not only is he allowed to say farewell to his parents, he can also turn his plough into a BBQ and enjoy a jolly good feed!

So, in Jesus then, we see someone who is *not nearly* as soft and easy going as the great and terrible prophet Elijah! *The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head; leave the dead to bury their dead; no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God*. Jesus not only surpasses the law and the prophets. He demands *more* than the law and the prophets! How could it be otherwise with the Cross as our goal, our map, our road?!

What we see today, and repeated again and again, is that the *costliness* of following Jesus is really in our letting go. Letting go so God can be God. Letting go so Christ can find his way into our crowded lives and hearts. Letting go of our comfort and security. Letting go of our obsessions with success and competition. Letting go of our pride and ambitions. Letting go of our ideas of self-autonomy and independence. Letting go of our worldly understandings of power and authority. These are the hard truths that Jesus wishes to speak to us. To follow him, to enjoy the life, the abundance of life he promises, we need to let go. Let go, as Saint Paul so, so helpfully tells us today, so that *we might be free*. Free so we can live as God intends us to live. Free to share his good news. My friends, let us resolutely keep the cross of Christ before us. Let us joyfully accept the freedom Christ brings. Let us humbly accept the hard word he speaks to us. Amen.