

A matter of discipleship

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

"No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. " Lk.9,62

Collect:

Almighty God, of ourselves we have no power to help ourselves. Keep us outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

With undivided heart

1 With undivided heart and ceaseless songs
give thanks to God.
To Him all majesty and praise belongs:
give thanks to God.
His love and truth proclaim,
His mercy still the same;
and for His holy name
give thanks to God.

2 Exalt His name and His eternal word,
He is our God.
Before His throne our every prayer is heard,
He is our God.

Let kings declare His praise,
sing of His words and ways,
for through eternal days
He is our God.

3 He reigns in glory from His throne above,
He is the Lord:
and in our weakness meets us with His love:
He is the Lord.
His purpose cannot fail,
though fears and foes assail,
His love shall still prevail,
He is the Lord.

Words by Timothy Dudley-Smith

Readings: 1 Kng.19,1-8 / Ps.34 / Eph.5,1-9

Lk.9,57-62

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord let me first go and

bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Dear friends

Faith in God, as his word but also history reminds us, is for doing, it is something “done”. If it is inactive or even counteractive, it is not faith but only the *appearance* of faith. But how is faith in God “done”? It is done by following Jesus Christ, by being his disciple. Jesus’ summons “Follow me!” is the call of faith and the call to faith to trust God and obey him in the concrete circumstances of one’s life (and all of one’s life).

Now the man in our passage in saying to Jesus, ‘I will follow you wherever you go’, shows that he has listened and has understood something, that he has heard faith’s call to follow Jesus. And his decision to follow him is made by faith.

However, in the dialogue that follows between Jesus and this man, and the others, this theme of deciding to believe and follow Jesus is given some surprising attention. All 3 who appear in this encounter and express a willingness to follow Jesus, rather than being welcomed and commended as one might expect, are being sounded out in quite an unexpected way. It looks as though Jesus seeks to discourage them, as though they are not really wanted. This impression is created by the fact that the demands and conditions Jesus attaches to following him seem unnecessarily harsh, even unreasonable. And we suspect that they must be designed to appear to be off-putting so as to prove whether their intention is genuine, rather than that they state an actual demand or an actual condition.

But Jesus does not want to put them off, nor us. The call of faith is open and genuine and it does seek the decision to follow Jesus. But Jesus wants to disabuse them, and us, of illusions and ties that are detrimental to faith and discipleship if left to be. And these illusions and ties are such that we hold them as self-evidently as we do the notion that one needs to have a home in this world and a roof over one’s head, that it is proper to bury one’s dead and good manners to say goodbye to one’s family before heading off.

What is Jesus getting at? Well, it might help if we begin with the question that many might well ask: “Who does Jesus think he is to ask such things of those who are ready and willing to follow him?!” Because, if Jesus is, as many believe he is, a teacher – of wisdom, morality, spirituality -, if following him means you accept some or any of his principles and his teaching and his views on God and you apply them as best you will, if he is an example of a good person that you and I can emulate: then how could it be right of him to demand this level of commitment?! Would a good person demand you don’t bury your father for the sake of following him? Surely that would not be a good person. In this case (if that is who Jesus is) such a demand – and that’s what Jesus’ remarks help us to see plainly – would be deeply improper.

But this would not be the case if Jesus is God’s claim on you, God’s call to you and God’s gift for you, if following him is the only real way of yielding yourself to God and walking humbly with God, if Jesus is God saying, ‘Here I AM; fear not, I have redeemed you, you are mine, and nothing shall separate you from God’s love’, if Jesus is God’s coming into our world and is also the way for man to be with

God: then how could it be right *not* to demand this level of commitment? Anything else would be a commitment of a partial and divided nature! And *this* would be improper.

What Jesus is getting at is this that faith in God, following Jesus Christ, is not something that is going to be done in a half-hearted way. God wants an undivided heart. Because faith is to operate and bring about changes on the level of last and ultimate things, of last and ultimate loyalties. It has to do with what the heart at bottom and ultimately belongs to and trusts in; it is about life, not aspects of it but life itself, whether it is won or lost, it is a matter of realising that every moment counts because it is relative to eternity.

Being a Christian, being a disciple, is not something any can be ‘a little bit’ in the same way one cannot be ‘a little bit’ pregnant. Being a follower of Christ is not something one can be ‘among other things’ just like one cannot *exist* ‘among other things’. And this is what the men who are willing to follow Jesus do not truly perceive.

And let’s be honest, can we blame them? Do we think their requests are detrimental to their plan to follow Jesus? Would we not have considered things in the same way?

But the thing is, and this is detrimental, they see God and faith as something that they have to, and can, integrate into their lives, as something that fits in with what’s there and with their orientation and must be reconciled with a range of other commitments. But self-evident as this may appear to them, this is their illusion. Because the consequence of this is that they thereby prevent the changes that faith seeks and enables and that discipleship of Christ is meant to put into place and carry through: No renunciation of the things that tie the heart to the world, no separation or coming out from among a mindset and culture that is governed by death and by the fear of death and is held captive by the sins of the past, and no desire or freedom to walk in new ways, to put off the old (that is the sinful ‘me’) and put on the new (that is Christ).

But all this is what a follower of Jesus Christ is called to, because belonging no longer to the world but to Christ, they are God’s.

Dear friends, we must learn again and anew what it means that “*God does not live in temples built by human hands*” (Acts 17,24), that faith in God is not like a house among other houses which we sometimes go to before we return to our own house, the sphere of our own say; but that God seeks the devotion of an undivided heart, people who “*will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth*” (Jn.4,23); that following Jesus will make us roofless in the world and strangers to the spirit, thoughts and ways that the world is at home in (“*our citizenship is in heaven*” - Phil.3,20), that following Jesus will open our eyes to the fact that the past no longer has hold over us and that we shall not be our past as those are that are dying, but that the new has arrived, that in him we are a *new creation* living by new principles springing from the hope of resurrection in our heart. With Paul we will learn to say: “*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus*” (Phil.3,12-14).

Yes, we must learn all this. And the way we do this is not by law but by faith, is not by going into ourselves but by *keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of faith* (Hebr.12,2), who has made God’s immense love for us known by *laying down his life for us as an atoning sacrifice*

for our sins (1Jn.3,16;4,10) and who has risen from the dead to a new life – one that is now by the Spirit given *in him* to all who believe. He who has “*become for us wisdom from God – that is our righteousness, holiness and redemption*” (1Cor.1,30), even He is our learning.

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small,
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

[Isaac Watt]

AMEN

Lord God, to you be all praise, glory and honour. We seek to worship you with an undivided heart, in the Spirit and in truth. The world ties us to itself through our desires, our sins have hardened our hearts and blinded us to what lets you be God and what makes us live in your light, even the light of your love. Have mercy on us and make us find our delight in you through the knowledge of Jesus Christ in the forgiveness of our sins, so that it may become the desire of our hearts to follow the example he gave us all and do so in his strength by the Holy Spirit, to your praise.

- time of prayer / intercession – [we pray for those who have become ill, are fighting illness or are recovering from it, for those in the caring professions and for those in positions of leadership as they make decisions about the way out of the pandemic; for those who have lost loved ones and need the loving presence of friends; we give thanks for the progress brought about by the availability of vaccines; we pray for the courage of faith to trust and obey; we pray for God’s people here and throughout the world, for wisdom and love to be light to others and praise for God’s name; we pray for those who bring peace and that we ourselves may be such in our own place;]

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.

AMEN