

Highfield Rd Uniting Church

This is serious

Luke 9:51 - 62



“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem”.

We so easily read that passage and think that it is about the crucifixion and what will happen to Jesus after his death. However, Luke’s purpose in these stories of Jesus’ mission and teaching on the road to Jerusalem is about what will happen to the disciples after Jesus’ death! And it’s not just Luke; all the Gospels contain stories of the difficulties that people had in following Jesus; and those stories are all set when the charismatic and impressive Jesus is still alive, how hard it is when he is not here! Even if Jesus’ words to his would-be followers in this story at the start of the journey are a bit extreme, cryptic, and metaphorical, they make the point. Following Jesus is difficult, and the path of discipleship is serious.

While the selection in today’s lectionary looks a bit like two stories put together to make a decent number of verses for a reading in church, it is one combined lesson on the serious nature of following Jesus. It’s not just the would-be disciples who have mistaken ideas of what is involved in walking the path of faith following Jesus, James and John had been following Jesus long enough to have known better than to seek divine retribution. It’s not that long since they had been sent out, just like the others of the twelve, with the instruction to shake the dust off their feet when a town rejected them. Had they forgotten so soon? Or were they caught up in the centuries-old racial conflict between Jews and Samaritans and thought the ‘shake the dust off your feet’ instruction applied only in Jewish territory? They needed to learn the same ‘hand to the plough’ message that the man who wanted to say farewell to his family got. You can’t keep your eyes on Jesus and follow the way of humility, service and love if you keep looking back to the old ways of division, hatred, and the arrogant idea that you are special in the sight of God. I still giggle at the picture of James and John so self-righteous as to think they could call down fire from heaven!

The extreme language that Jesus uses in answering the three would-be disciples - and it is possible that these are three separate stories that Luke has put together for effect - can lead us to get the wrong idea if taken literally. We are not all called to abandon our families and take up the life of itinerant preachers. There must be a way to read these words so that they speak to our discipleship in this world and this culture.

“Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” While this may have been physically true for Jesus and his disciples walking from village to village, the real lesson is a reflection on the first part of the reading. This is not just about a comfortable sleep; this is about rejection. To follow Jesus is to walk the controversial way of love and acceptance and that brings rejection from a world that is about self and exclusion. The mission of salvation and reconciliation is serious. To follow, really follow, our Lord who criticised the powers enough to be crucified, means the possibility of rejection.

“Let the dead bury their dead.” Even if this means ‘let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead’, it is a harsh saying that seems to have no place in the pastorally important world of mortality and grieving. I have shared some wonderful moments of real, loving connection with people in the time of grieving and funeral preparation. However, if we look past the extreme language, this is a message about cultural obligations and excuse making. The Laws and traditions of Israel about family must have been a big issue in the early church to have teaching like this and then, in a later chapter, “To follow me, you must hate your family”! Faith, particularly following a new faith, is serious and requires careful consideration of priorities, “Can you place following Jesus first in your priorities?”

“No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is for the kingdom of God.” You cannot plough a straight furrow if you keep turning your head to look behind. In context, Jesus is talking about grieving over what you have left behind. Connected to the previous statement and to the behaviour of James and John, it refers to old stories and old traditions. This is serious; it’s about embracing the new way of Jesus in love and reconciliation as your sole focus. In an earlier chapter, Jesus tells us, “You can’t put new wine in old wineskin.” Set aside and ignore what takes your eyes and mind off following Jesus.

It is said that the church is disconnected from daily living; that what we talk about in the church, both in worship and through our public proclamations, doesn’t translate into the everyday working world. And these teachings about discipleship appear to be like that - they’re about evangelism and personal faith and the decision to follow Jesus. However, it’s really the opposite - these would-be disciples are raising the issues that face us all, every day, in our walk of faith following Jesus.

Are we avoiding controversy to avoid rejection? Not pointing out injustice, not speaking up for those who are abused, not standing up for a better way than anger and violence. Rather, we take the path of niceness and accommodation, at the shops, in our workplaces or communities, and even in our families.

Are we choosing cultural obligations or traditions over following our faith? Choosing to work overtime instead of joining family time, choosing entertainment instead of volunteering with a mission, or for those who are trying to be disciples, waiting until we have finished the Bible Study course and the evangelism course and the discipleship course.

Are we looking to the past with 9 to 5 businesses and community-minded citizens who joined groups, and grieving the way life used to be, rather than seeing and finding our way in the 24/7 individualistic, internet-connected world that surrounds us? As individuals, that means adapting and helping others who are struggling to adapt. As a church, that means looking beyond the church building to see where Jesus is now and thinking about the church in the marketplace or the church on the internet.

Without Jesus physically in front of us, it is difficult to follow. Discipleship is serious business, and the writers of scripture knew that and have given us guidance through the words of Jesus, not as a how-to manual but in stories and metaphors that set our minds working. You have put your hand to the plough, keep looking towards Jesus to plough a straight way.