

Sunday 1 July 2007: Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Discipleship

Readings: Galatians 5. 1, 13-25; Luke 9. 51-end

Vincent Van Gough wrote to his Brother Theo during one period of struggle and despair, that he felt like a man who had dived into a river to cross it, but finding the water too cold does not know whether to try to swim on, or seek to regain the bank. It has always struck me as a good image when ever we embark upon a human plan which ends up to have consequences and difficulties far greater than we were able to imagine beforehand. When we make those decisions of discernment and choice we can never know in advance the way our lives will be changed. Perhaps it is good we do not have too many prophetic gifts or we would balk at beginning anything of risk.

Today's Gospel comes midway through the Gospel of Luke. It is one of those pivotal points of choice in the life of Christ and those who follow him. We hear the words: "when the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." He set his face to go. It is a powerful expression, Jesus has marked out his destination, he is looking up, looking ahead choosing his course and his way forward. Like a ship taking a compass bearing into the heart of the storm. The journey has begun for Jesus and those who will follow him, tearing them from the green fertility of Galilee into the Judean desert and the city of Jerusalem. Up until this point the ministry of Jesus has been a dynamic time of miracle and success. He has led with authority, healed the sick, cast out evil, forgiven sins, fed the 5000 and in chapter 8 even raised the dead. Indeed the disciples have been basking in Jesus reflected and deferred power and glory - Jesus has given **them** the power to cast out evil in his name, healing all kinds of diseases and preaching the good news of the coming kingdom. This is how many want their religion, a faith which brings signs, wonders and measurable success. It is easy for them to see God's hand at work in success. Peter and James and John have seen Jesus transfigured on a mountain - dazzling white between Moses and Elijah. It is all heady stuff, not surprising that the heads of these followers have been turned. They are full of the hopes of even greater glories and arguments over which one of them was the greatest. But who would have had the courage to continue if they fully realised the brutal reality of the events which would take place in Jerusalem?

But our story has moved on and there is no going back. These mixed assortment of fishermen, tax collectors and sinners have discovered their Messiah but that discovery is going to change things in a way that is so very different from the future they imagined. Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem and turns their heads too in that direction. And he confronts, pointing to a path which uses the language of loss rather than gain, self-offering and a cross rather than triumph. Jesus issues a call to decision that will distinguish this group of disciples from the bystanders, the spectators the critics and the benefit seekers. They have followed... on tour as it were. But they can't be tourists on this journey any more. You see its no longer a question of just having a time away, testing the temperature of the water with their toe, or seeing what the loaves and fishes taste like - something much more is demanded. There lives are at stake. And the Gospel passage which we have just heard is without doubt a tough call. This is not sweet Jesus meek and mild this is Jesus as a Franciscan friend of mine used to say - is the great wrecker of lives - on the edge, destabilising, the one who turns lives upside down with his demands. A discipleship which seems to cost not less than everything.

The warning bells sound... I remember my father's advise "for goodness sake don't take religion too seriously." He knew better than most, he was a vicar. If anyone starts talking

about the cost of discipleship the danger signs immediately start to flash up. You look for the fanatic gleam in their eye. We don't do religion in Britain as our former Prime Minister learnt to his cost. We learn to keep our Christian faith firmly in the closet and feel horrified when confronted by those fanatics who carry around their Bibles as though they were their satellite navigation systems to life. ... It all seems so unnecessarily demanding and intense. Much better a benevolent "nice" God demanding nothing. Jeremy Paxman writes in his book on the English "I once asked the Bishop of Oxford what you needed to believe to be a member of his Church. A look of slight bafflement crossed his face. "What an intriguing question," he answered, as if it had not occurred to him before and then he opened with that inevitable English preface: "Well it rather depends...."

Ricky Gervais on *Desert Island Disks* this week described how he gave up on religion when he realised God was just like a free baby-sitter who his mother called upon to look after him when no one else was available.

This is all so very different from the radical nature of the demands Christ makes in this Gospel:

Fox's have holes birds of the air have nests but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head. Follow me."

"Lord first let me go and bury my father"

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

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

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

These are tough words which require an obedience which risks all, calls us to abandon the security of home and possession, even family loyalty, and accepts no giving up or turning back. What seems demanded is a faith which is not an appendage to our lives but actually the priority at the centre of all we are and all we do and from which everything else flows. This calling is not one among many choices it is rather the direction and orientation of our lives.

And this call to discipleship is costly. Bonhoeffer knew more than any its cost: he wrote: "Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again, the gift which must be asked for the door which must be knocked upon. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. Above all it is costly because it costs God the life of his son"

Perhaps we do not realise the full meaning of this call or the kingdom it promises until we are up against it, threatened, vulnerable or crisis or forced by circumstances or events to question. Perhaps this is the reason that it was the poor and vulnerable who felt most able to say yes and follow. Yesterday I was reminded of this during a retreat day for those who have suffered situations of pain and loss at St Ethelburga's. Many of these people taking part were those who were refugees and seeking asylum. I was struck again that among those who you would think would most doubt God's providential care, that here were those who had a religious faith that seemed so vital and alive to them - a faith in which something was at stake and their lives were in the offering.

Christ's question is not about dishonouring your father it's about loving God. "Do you really love me?" Not a question of abandoning the burial of ones own father in order to follow Christ, but the discovery that it is in the following of Christ one is also able to share most

fully in the lives of those we love. Let the dead bury the dead... let the living Christ give life to the dead. The realisation that the best way of loving family and friends and indeed those who have gone before us is in the following of Christ. Our love is held in his. It is the most precious gift we have.

As we discussed in our after Church Sunday discussion groups the meaning of home, I suddenly realised these words of Christ not as a threat of things to come, not as the warning of the suffering and sacrifice the Christian life demands but as a freedom. For each of us who shared our thoughts on home all had that same sense of never entirely belonging anywhere - but seeking. And in this journey there was the knowledge that this was the Christian journey - for it was Christ's own story. Can you answer the radical demand to follow without fanaticism and intolerance? Yes but it is a path of letting go rather than seizing. It is a call of trust, one where we could not turn back or hold back the time but were being called to move forward in faith, overcoming the temptation to despair and the fear of and threat of the unknown. And surprisingly there can be a lightness in this journey - belonging to no material thing or place but belonging to Christ and through him to one another. This belonging is not an institutional thing, nor is it another agenda of function or aspect or task: it is much more about an openness. Christ in both the light and the darkness his love holding and containing the diverse fragments of our lives. This path of discipleship is contrary to our fears not about repression but manifests itself as a new and greater freedom to be.

As I reflect on this period of transition in the life of this Church it is this realisation of a longing for a greater trust and awareness of Christ's presence among us. As we walked around all that is taking place behind the hoardings at St Martins, even with the scaffolding and the crane, you can already glimpse the possibility of space light, a place of prayer. And a longing that we don't clutter it and pressurise and fill but allow God some open space, time to breath and move us. Our calling is stripping away of things that are familiar, a disorientation coupled with a reorientation. As we answer the call to discipleship it is in fact not the taking on of another burden but in fact a setting free. It is the space at the centre of our lives for hope. This is the voice which addresses us in the Gospel today in bold humility. He says "Surrender yourself to God in all simplicity, the little faith you have is enough. I am your home and your dwelling place. I will never abandon you. And I call each one of your to embark upon this journey with me." Jesus says "follow me" what could be more simple, or more demanding, or more special than that?