

Sunday 27 June: Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Finding freedom in following

Readings: Galatians 5.1, 13-15; Luke 9.51-end

Last week we prayed for Joseph Kock Ping Lee, who has been working for the last seven years as a chef in the café here at St Martin-in-the-Fields and is leaving to follow his calling, becoming a monk at the Cistercian Trappist community at Mount St Bernard Abbey in Leicestershire. The email from Stuart the Head Chef telling us about Joseph, (and the bible and sandals that were being brought as a parting gift for him), came as quite a surprise. Joseph is clearly a much-loved colleague who in the daily life of the kitchen has been an inspiration to his work mates. Stuart wrote, 'Joseph has worked his way up the ranks from Kitchen Porter to Demi Chef De Partie and has done a great job and is the perfect employee, never being late or taking one sick day off!'

On Wednesday Joseph came to the Choral Eucharist service with Fr Rufus from the community that he is joining... and Richard led special prayers for him... In a letter he wrote to us after the service, he quoted a passage about this single-minded path of discipleship that he has set his heart on, which ended:

'Lord, you alone...you alone endure. There is nothing under the sun that can fill our hearts but you. Outside of you all is shadows.'

This week the theme of discipleship is very present. Morning Worship on Radio 4 this morning broadcast from St Martin-in-the-Fields explored how we are called to be 'Instruments of God's love' as we offer our gifts in his service; we look forward in this Pentecost to the ordination of deacons and priests, including the ordination of eight priests here next Sunday evening; and Richard Carter will be leading the ordination retreat at Canterbury Cathedral. Whether we are called to life in community, to ordination, to living out our calling and offering our gifts in the places where we work, our homes, and in our communities, the call is exactly the same and the response required is exactly the same.

It's a tough love, as our reading from Luke's Gospel today shows us but a love that if we respond, facing too the challenges that come with it, sets us free. Because it calls us to use our gifts and to be who we are in the service of others.

There is a great sense of urgency, focus, and momentum to Luke's account, both in the nature of the journey, in Jesus' demeanour and in his responses to the three would-be disciples. It comes as a turning point as he starts the last stage of his journey. Determinedly setting his face towards Jerusalem means taking upon himself the journey to the cross, and through the passion, resurrection and ascension, the journey to the Father. Like the suffering servant in Isaiah, here Jesus 'sets his face like flint' in obedience to God's will.¹ And almost immediately he faces opposition in the form of the Samaritan village, who reject him. It is just a taste of what he will face once he reaches Jerusalem.

Jesus may be physically with his disciples but he is way ahead, his loneliness palpable; a loneliness that won't let him go until on the cross he commends himself into his father's hands. We are soon reminded that his determination and focus are not life denying but life-giving and all about love. When two of his disciples James and John suggest that like Elijah

¹ Isaiah 50.7

they call down fire on the Samaritans, Jesus reminds them that they are following another way with different values. And the disciples will have to learn that experiencing rejection and hostility will be part of what it means to journey to and with God.

There is always that stage in our journey with God when we are called to go that bit deeper; our own time to leave the safety and security of Galilee. We might be asked to work in areas that take us outside our comfort zone, with those who make us question our values or priorities, give up our job for something less certain or which pays us less, move home, are weakened by illness or loss. However it comes to us we cannot avoid the moment of commitment when we actually have to let go of the safe way and set off on the uncertain costly path. Like those Celtic saints who set sail on the uncertain swell of the sea.

For the disciples up till now the journey has meant being alongside this authoritative teacher and healer, witnessing his miracles and acts of power. The disciples have played their own part too, been given power and authority to act in Jesus' name. But as their argument about who is the greatest amongst them shows they haven't understood what they are being called to, nor the cost of it. Following Jesus is not a call to prestige, or glory or power but to loss and rejection and humble self-giving. Now is the time to get real, become aware of what it means to live a life that will set them apart, out on the risky edge that demands everything and is where Love is.

Jesus' response to the three would-be disciples along the road, speaks of a God that is uncompromising, whose love and call are set beyond the confines of the comfortable, the known and the expected. To the follower who naively says 'I will follow you wherever you go' Jesus gives a flavour of what the life will really be like with its lack of security, and comfort. To the one who wishes to fulfil his duties and bury his father, he speaks of a call that cuts across laws and all the things that we would normally do. To the one who wants to go back, he says let go, move on, love's pull is more urgent.

What Jesus says is hard, that the pull of God should be at heart of all that we do, beyond the comforts and commitments, ties and conventions of our daily life. God is to be met in uncertainty and insecurity – in the far reaches of the tides of life. There is something more to be learned about God, there is something more that we have to give to others in this place that Jesus calls us to.

We may, like the naive follower of our passage rush in with rash promises. What is more genuine and probably where most of us find ourselves is in hesitation and doubt, as we try to understand what we are letting ourselves in for, weighing up the real cost of the commitment. What draws us is where hand in hand with the cost, we find joy and life and freedom both for others and for ourselves.

Paul calls the Galatians to lives of freedom in God's Spirit. For them the leap of faith is letting go of the requirements and security of the law. If you are loving in the right way you will already be doing all that the law requires he says. You will be making others free and the spirit of God's love will show through your actions and behaviour. The fruits of loving in the right way are the marker of God's life living and growing in them.

Someone who used to serve on Bishop's Advisory Panels, that assess candidates for ordination, said that at the root of the decision, beyond all the interviews and assessments and suitability for the role he would always hold on to the question 'Would this life be a burden or a joy for this person?'

The cost of discipleship is that in the end God calls us to offer our very selves. There is struggle and cost but also a real longing to do it and a deep joy and satisfaction in doing it because it calls from us who we really are and could be. Discipleship is a setting free of our gifts and a mark of that is the joy of knowing we are on a journey offering our real selves.

Francis Dewar in his book 'Called or Collared'² writes 'God invites you to sing your song for others, your words, your music...no one else can sing your song. The inner sense of call is always to something that will be drawn out from within you, not something that will be provided for you out there. It is always a call to take the risk of encountering your true self in some way for the enrichment of others.'

God sees possibilities for hope, for justice, for healing, for human flourishing that no one else has. If we respond to his call we may be taken beyond what we think is reasonable or possible or comfortable. In the generous offering of our gifts in the uncertainties and strangeness of this place we will know the generosity of his love. We will be extended, reaching out to where God's love meets us in the lives of others.

For when we ourselves are swept out on life's tide to the unfamiliar margins of our comfortable existence, it is God who extended, finds us.

'Lord, you alone...you alone endure. There is nothing under the sun that can fill our hearts but you...outside of you all is shadows.'

² F Dewar, "Called or Collared – An Alternative Approach to Vocation", SPCK, 2000