

Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 26 June 2022 – ‘Put your hand to the plough’ - by Revd David Cuckson

Opening Sentences (*Psalm 16:7-9a*)

Let us follow the example of the Psalmist in praising God as we prepare to offer worship:-

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices.

HYMN Singing the Faith 56 (*George Herbert*)

1. King of Glory, King of Peace,
I will love thee;
and that love may never cease
I will move thee.
Thou hast granted my request,
thou hast heard me;
thou didst note my working breast,
thou hast spared me.

2. Wherefore with my utmost art
I will sing thee,
and the cream of all my heart
I will bring thee.
Though my sins against me cried,
thou didst clear me;
and alone, when they replied,
thou didst hear me.

3. Seven whole days, not one in seven,
I will praise thee;
in my heart, though not in heaven,
I can raise thee.
Small it is, in this poor sort
to enrol thee;
E'en eternity's too short
to extol thee.

Prayer

Wise and Holy One, you are beyond our imagination, beyond our understanding, beyond our humanity; and because you are beyond us we turn to you for sanctuary, we come to you for protection.

Wise and Holy One, you are not completely beyond our imagination, because Jesus Christ shows us what you are like; you are not completely beyond our understanding, because Jesus Christ teaches us the way; you are not completely beyond our humanity, because Jesus Christ is one of us. And because you are beside us we can walk alongside you as a companion, we can speak honestly with you as a friend, we can keep silence with you as a lover.

Wise and Holy One, not completely beyond us, not only beside us but deep within our being, Spirit of God, when we feel confused, help us to make sense of life and share it with others; when we feel abandoned, help us to know your love and share it with others; when we feel at a loss, help us to rediscover hope and offer it to others; when we fail to love you,

help us to know your forgiveness and share it with others; encourage us to leave what is past and travel on, with you and all your people, into your glorious future. **Amen**

Eternal God, who longs for us to know all good things and to walk along a peaceful path, open the eyes of our hearts that we may see the way to life, open our ears that we may hear the truth, and open our lips that we may praise you, this day and all our days, in Jesus' name. **Amen**

Luke 9: 51-62 (NRSVA)

A Samaritan Village Refuses to Receive Jesus

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

Would-be Followers of Jesus

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 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, 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 let me first 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 God.'

Reflection

Most of the second part of our reading also appears in Matthew's Gospel, but Luke has given these sayings a specific context as part of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem for the final confrontation with the religious authorities and the ultimate conclusion in the Cross and the Resurrection. Sayings on the theme of discipleship fit in here quite naturally. Many folk have been following Jesus quite happily, even enthusiastically, in the area around the Sea of Galilee, but they are now going to be challenged severely once Jesus is arrested and condemned to death.

The tensions with the Samaritans reflect a common and long-standing feud between Jews and Samaritans over where was the location of the one true sanctuary of the Deuteronomic law, Mount Gerizim in Samaria or Jerusalem. Most of the time the two neighbouring groups lived side by side relatively peacefully, but folk who were clearly on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem from the north were liable to have their journey impeded, to the extent that most pilgrims took a longer route avoiding the Samaritan territory. Jesus, however, does not do this. He faces the issue head on and does not allow it to deflect him from his ultimate goal. He shows here the determination that is going to mark his conduct in the final days of the

Passion – not to the point of being aggressive about it, as James and John were suggesting (in the tradition of Elijah), but pursuing a slightly different course, going on to another village, that achieved his purpose without compromising his principles.

When Jesus started talking about foxes and birds, his immediate hearers would have caught the allusions straight away. ‘Foxes’ had been applied to folk like the Ammonites, people racially akin to, but politically enemies of Israel, and Jesus, of course, referred to Herod as ‘that fox’. The ‘birds of the air’, again, would have been readily recognised as standing for the Gentile nations. The ‘foxes’ and the ‘birds’ had taken over the country – especially the Romans and their hangers-on, who were a foreign occupation there for the long term. Compared with them the pure Israel, epitomised in the term, ‘Son of Man’, was a struggling underclass, effectively with no legal rights within the homeland. Jesus was facing Jerusalem not from a position of strength but rather with no secular power, only with a vision and the love of God to proclaim. Did I say, ‘only’? Events will prove who ultimately will prevail.

Outwardly everything was against Jesus’ mission. Already he was facing difficulties with the Samaritans, and these difficulties would pale into insignificance compared with the challenges ahead. No wonder, then, that followers were finding excuses – ‘Yes, we believe in you, we will follow you, but, please, not just yet. First let me go and bury my father. Let me first say farewell to those at my home. Let me see how things work out. If all goes well in Jerusalem, then certainly I will stand up as one of your disciples.’ But that is not what Jesus wants. ‘Go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ He was - he is – looking for an unqualified discipleship – without hesitation or deviation, with no looking back once you have put a hand to the plough.

This image of the ploughman is a powerful one and is valid whether you imagine a man walking behind a plough pulled by one or two oxen, or in this country more likely horse or horses, or a modern tractor pulling a large and sophisticated piece of kit behind it. Look forward, if you want to keep the line straight. If you turn round to look behind you, something is likely to go wrong. Concentrate on the job in hand, keep the final objective always first in your mind.

The way of discipleship is not an easy thing to undertake, nor the continuing service of the Kingdom. The scholar of the last century, T W Manson, in commenting on this passage, sums it up as follows: ‘It offers no obvious advantages, and it makes extremely exacting demands. Those, therefore, who would attach themselves to Jesus must count the cost of their allegiance; they must be prepared to endure hardship; they must be willing to sacrifice their own feelings; they must give absolute priority to the work of the Kingdom and give themselves to it with perfect singleness of purpose.’

Put your hand to the plough, and rely on the promise of the Kingdom, seen in Jesus.

HYMN Singing the Faith 254 (*Karen Lafferty*)

1, Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
and his righteousness,
and all these things shall be added unto you;
Allelu-, alleluia:

*Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia,
allelu-, alleluia.*

2. Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
seek and ye shall find;
knock, and the door will be opened unto
you;
Allelu-, alleluia:

3. We shall not live my bread alone,
but by every word
that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;
Allelu-, alleluia:

Prayers

God, Maker and Lover of all, we know that your way is not always easy; that peace is not given lightly, that sometimes justice comes only through struggle.

We pray for the places in your world where we long to see justice and dream of peace.

We remember especially the peoples of... [*Think of recent headlines*] where conflicts seem so long-standing and complex that we cannot imagine resolution; and we pray for wisdom and reconciliation.

We remember communities divided by poverty and racism, especially... [*Think of those currently in the news*] where the gaps between privilege and powerlessness seem to grow ever wider; and we pray for justice and healing.

We remember your church, sometimes fragmented and confused, where in spite of division, your people seek to live out the Gospel; and we pray for joy and a new sense of the Spirit's power.

We remember our friends and neighbours especially... and ourselves, in those areas of our lives where we struggle to be true to what we have learned of you; and we pray for faithfulness and courage.

God, Maker and Lover of us all, who summons us in Jesus to the way of the cross, and empowers us to live by your Spirit, hear our prayer. **Amen.**

The Blessing

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

[Prayers taken and adapted from the URC Service of the Word]