

## Following Jesus

Robert Twycross 1 July 2007

Today is New Prime Minister Sunday, something which has occurred only 4 times in the last 30 years – much less often than the Olympics or the World Cup. Even so, my comments this morning have been prompted by today's Gospel Reading [Luke 9: 51–62], with its theme of following Jesus.

<p style="text-align: center;">‘Will you come and follow me, if I but call your name? Will you go where you don't know and never be the same? Will you let my love be shown, will you let my love be known, Will you let my life be grown in you, and you in me?’</p>
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The Reading began with Jesus setting out from Galilee Province (possibly from Capernaum on the North Shore of the Lake) to travel south through Samaria to Jerusalem in Judea Province – a journey of some 90 miles. A distance which would take a fit adult a minimum of 3 days, but with a motley group of companions, more likely to take the best part of a week. And if chapter 10 of St Luke really does follow on chronologically from chapter 9, then on this historic journey, Jesus took a break part-way, and sent 70 of his followers out in pairs ‘to every town and every place where he himself intended to go’ (Luke 10.1).

So let's join Jesus in our imagination.

First: the journey from Capernaum to Jerusalem took several weeks, or even longer.

Second: there was advanced publicity in the villages and towns through which Jesus and his followers would pass [v.52: ‘Jesus sent messengers ahead of him.’]

Third: it was a large group of people who went with Jesus. If you add up the figures, I think you'll find we're talking about the best part of 100. Quite a procession and, I suggest, inevitably an intimidating one. Not only large in numbers but large in high spirits and large in noise – possibly singing songs from Psalms Ancient and Modern or Galilee Praise. Sending messengers ahead was essential if they were not to cause panic – the local population needed to know that it was a Peace March and not a riot. But, even so, it was hardly surprising that at least one village set up a road-block to prevent an invasion by this large crowd of noisy travellers.

Further, the crowd almost certainly got larger as it moved south, and that takes us to the second half of today's Reading. This records encounters between Jesus and three possible additional followers – two volunteers and someone who Jesus specifically invited. Now these three exchanges between Jesus and the three possible new followers must be read in context. In Capernaum, Jesus probably still had a family home with a carpentry shed in the back yard. So saying that the Son of Man [himself] had nowhere to lay his head makes sense only in the context of this long slow walk to Jerusalem, with no guarantee of a decent B&B at the end of each day. Likewise, given Jesus' comments on other occasions, his seeming disregard here for a person's family duties makes sense only in the context of this unique journey to Jerusalem. But, even so, the punch-line in v.62 has a timeless and universal quality about it: Jesus said, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God’ *Following Jesus is serious business – and it's not always easy.*

First, unlike those on this journey to Jerusalem, we don't have Jesus physically with us. Second, in many ways, life is more complicated today than it was 2000 years ago – there are many situations we face that Jesus didn't. For example, I doubt if Jesus was worried about climate change and global warming, or spiralling house prices, or genetically modified crops, or stem cell research. I don't think he said anything specific about drug barons, or suicide bombers, or even how best to cope with so-called 'neighbours from hell'.

Even those first disciples – who literally were following in the footsteps of Jesus – got it wrong time and time again. We read how two of the Apostles, James and John [nicknamed 'Sons of Thunder'] wanted to lob a petrol bomb over the road-block which barred their way through a village in Samaria. Jesus had to rebuke them, and we can imagine him reminding them forcefully about the need *not* to repay evil with evil. I can almost hear him saying:

'That way does *not* further the coming of my Kingdom – the Kingdom of God. You are to be people of peace, not terror'.

And if we'd started to read from verse 46, rather than verse 51, we'd have read about the argument the disciples had about which of them merited the most important Cabinet posts in Jesus' Kingdom. And about how Jesus needed to tick off the disciples for being narrowly exclusive, for thinking that they, as registered Jesus Party members, should be the only channel through which Kingdom of God values – Jesus values – could be disseminated. Yes, it's not always easy to follow Jesus. We need repeatedly to ask and answer the question, 'What would Jesus do in my situation/in our situation?'

*The trouble is, even if we do reflect in this way, we may still get it wrong.* James and John knew their Bible – or at least they thought they did – but they hadn't learnt that things had moved on, that Elijah's response 900 years earlier was not now the right way to go about things. And I suggest that the likelihood is that *we too*, at times, will get it wrong. A sobering thought.

Who's right? Those who support women priests (and Bishops) or those who oppose them? I suggest that both cannot be right.

Who's right? Those who accept gays and lesbians into the full fellowship of the Church, or those who want to keep them at arm's length. I suggest that both cannot be right.

So how do I learn 'the mind of Jesus' in such matters? Obviously, I must read and ponder the Gospel narratives. Yes, I need to ask 'What would Jesus do in my situation?' But thinking about it – just on my own – could lead me down a blind alley, or worse. I might end up lobbing petrol bombs.

The Kingdom of God is many things. But, first and foremost, it is communal rather than just personal. And I suggest that, if we are to discern the mind of Jesus, we need not only to think about it by ourselves but also to talk about it with each other.

When did you last sit down and seriously discuss the practical outworking of your faith with someone else? If the answer is 'Not for a long time', may I urge you to break your 'vow of silence' – otherwise you're in danger of getting it wrong, perhaps horribly wrong, just like the Apostles did. As Desmond Tutu recently said, 'It's not the Faith that's wrong, it's the Faithful'.

Your first opportunity to break your self-imposed silence is in the Coach House at the end of this service.

Your second opportunity is perhaps the *Food for Thought Lunch* this coming Tuesday when there will be the opportunity to begin to think together about the practical implications of this church's mission statement.

Your third opportunity is perhaps next Sunday's *Evening Celebration* when we'll be thinking about the scandal of modern-day slavery in Britain, and what we can do to help abolish it.

Your fourth opportunity (if you haven't done so in the past) is to sign up for the *Christian Spirituality Course* beginning in September.

In terms of growth in personal maturity and character, I suggest that God doesn't want us to standstill, at least not for long. Repeatedly throughout our lives, God tries to move us forward decisively in some way, out of our 'comfort zone' and into new and uncertain territory.

So, at the beginning of Gordon Brown's Premiership, I urge all of us to ask:  
What can I do individually/what can we do corporately to make our country/to make Oxford/to make Headington/to make my street a better place to live in?  
Not just for me, but for the disadvantaged, the marginalized, and the destitute.

Deirdre and I have already made one decision – about how we invest our savings. Yes, we're lucky, we have savings – but I imagine we're not the only ones in church today in that fortunate position. And even though it's a personal decision for Deirdre and me, I'm going to share with you what we've decided.

Many people fall into serious debt, and into the arms of 'loan sharks'. They desperately need help to sort out their finances, and advice about living within their means. They need low-interest loans in order to pay off the sharks. The Oxford Credit Union was set up just a year or two ago to do this – to provide seriously indebted people with the necessary help and advice. Deirdre and I have agreed that we should move some of our savings from a high-interest account to the Oxford Credit Union, even though (for the present at least) we'll receive no interest at all.

Jesus calls us to follow him; he calls us to love our neighbours as much as ourselves:

<p>'Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name. Let me turn and follow you and never be the same. In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show. Thus I'll move and live and grow in you, and you in me.'</p>
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