

Sunday 26th June 2022

*Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today, now and always. Amen*

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

Galatians 5:1, 11-20

Luke 9:51-62

I have never considered myself a very good runner. In fact as a kid I used to get laughed at for my long gangly legs and trying to run. My days of even attempting to run have definitely passed, but I have achieved a half marathon, 2 round the bays and 1 triathlon even if they were all were done walking.

I do recall running a race as a kid, actually at Brown owl school here in Upper Hutt, during the athletics day. I was up near the front, I think even coming second, that's with my seemingly inability to run, and I was doing really well. Then I decided to look back to see how close everyone else was, or probably to see where my friend was. In turning back to take a glance I did not notice the pot hole. As you can imagine said foot and ankle went in the pot hole and down I went. The lesson that I learnt that day was to keep my eyes forward, nothing good comes from looking back!

We are constantly given the message to look back, to look back at the past in order to move forward into the future. Matariki this weekend, and all the hype and build up to it, is a reminder to all of us who live in Aotearoa, to look back at the past and give thanks to those who have shaped the way, people who have gone before us and moulded us and made us into the people we are today. We are to turn and look Back at our history and celebrate the foundations on which things are built and give thanks. There is nothing wrong with that, in looking back at the past, but the stumbling block or pothole, comes when it becomes a hindrance and an excuse for moving forward and keeping our focus on where we should be heading towards.

Don't look back.

Our gospel reading is a reminder and lesson to us to not look back and lose our focus.

In this somewhat jarring — maybe even confusing — story we read today, we find Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem. It's a journey that will not end in glory or honor. Quite the opposite. It's one that will lead instead to the horrors of a crucifixion.

Jesus has upset the leaders of the Jewish community who are enriching themselves by colluding with the Roman Empire. He has openly ridiculed their treatment of the poor and the destitute. He has criticized the way they have heaped ethical burdens on the people that are too heavy to carry.

Jesus has also challenged the Roman rulers by stirring up the people and insisting that Yahweh God is the Lord, not Caesar.

This journey for Jesus is one of accepting the consequences of his own personal fidelity to that same God, whom he calls *Abba*, Father.

In doing so, Jesus now turns to his disciples and clearly outlines the very essence of the Christian life: discipleship. Worship is important. Prayer is necessary. But the crucial issue that dominates every other "religious" concern is: following Jesus. Living out of his value system and loving what Jesus loves.

Do not look back.

When you read today's Gospel passage carefully, you will note that Jesus is symbolically confronted by three people, but with the four problems that even today usually keep us "looking back."

1. Firstly The Danger of Rejection

As he starts off, he approaches a Samaritan village and so he sends messengers ahead to prepare the way for him. No doubt they tell the people that Jesus is planning to stay there on his way to Jerusalem. Now if you know anything about the relationships between the Jews and the Samaritans at this point in history you'll realise that this was a very gracious thing for Jesus to do. You see, what he was doing was including the Samaritans in his mission. He might well have bypassed them, but no, he sets out to stay with them, to

include them in the fulfilment of God's plan of salvation. But what is their response? They reject him. They don't want to be part of anyone who's set their face to go to Jerusalem. So here we see the first type of response to Jesus' call to follow him, to join him on the way of the cross. One response of people to the call of Jesus is rejection. But not only do we see that, but we also see the danger of rejection. The danger of rejection isn't what James and John, the Sons of Thunder, had in mind. It isn't that God will strike us down on the spot. No, it's more subtle than that, but nevertheless it's just as daunting. The danger of rejection is that Jesus will let us have our way. He never forces us to accept him. He just goes on to another village. In other words, if you choose to ignore the call of Jesus, he'll let you. That's a bit scary isn't it?

It's a bit like the child who throws a tantrum. At least one if not all four of our kids and even Levi has at some point thrown a massive tantrum or hissy fit. In fact I can remember when Levi was little standing in the mall with him in the trolley standing out by the store while he was throwing a doozy. Yes it echoed throughout the whole mall, and I waited patiently while he screamed and he realised he was not going to get what he wanted, and waited for him to calm down. I did have a well meaning person want to give him an ice cream, as if more sugar would have helped!

I have learned over the years, that the best way to deal with a tantrum is to either walk out of the room or simply stand your ground and then ignore the behaviour. Why? Because when the child realises their bluff has been called they stop screaming. The aim of the tantrum is to get the parent to try harder to please the child. But if the child is left to scream without an audience they soon give up. Well, it's a bit more serious when it comes to Jesus' call. Those who reject Jesus find themselves, like that child, left alone, but what a terrible thing it must be to find yourself ignored by the living God, left to your own devices, without God to call on when you find yourself in trouble. But that's what happens here. We're told that they went to another village.

2. The second point is The Cost of Commitment.

So Jesus moves on and as he's walking down the road someone comes up to him and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." Here's someone who's recognised Jesus as a great

leader and who wants to follow him. But the only trouble is, he hasn't really thought about what following Jesus entails. His is almost a flippant comment. A superficial desire to be in on the excitement of Jesus' mission, without first considering the cost of commitment. But Jesus doesn't want superficial commitment. He wants deep commitment based on a clear understanding of what following him entails. He says "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Elsewhere he tells his followers that to follow him entails taking up their cross. That is, being ready to die for Jesus sake. The call to follow Jesus isn't an easy thing. It involves being at odds with the world, possibly at the cost of our lives. It means that the act of following is going to be uncomfortable, costly, and demand a lot from us.

3. The third point in following Jesus is The Priority of Commitment

But just because Jesus rebukes this man doesn't mean he doesn't want people to follow him. Because he then turns to another man and says to him "Follow me." This man understands what Jesus is asking but asks that he first be allowed to go and bury his father. That is, he's asking if he can leave the decision to later, when his father's died and he no longer has that family responsibility. But Jesus say, 'No, this is a call that takes first priority'. The Priority of Commitment to Jesus overrides even the priority of caring for your father. So many people use excuses to no to follow Christ? To not be fully involved in the life of the church, to show concern and get alongside those in the community because other things get in the way. We look backwards to maybe see what we have done in the past, what has been always done and don't see the pot hole or the excuse as being or stumbling block.. But Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." The priority of commitment to Jesus comes about not just because Jesus is Lord of all, though that's a good start. No, it also comes about because people are dying. When he talks of the dead burying the dead, he's saying 'those who haven't heard the gospel are as good as dead. They need the gospel to bring them back to life.

4. And finally The Lifelong Nature of Commitment

Finally, another person comes up to Jesus and says, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." It sounds like a reasonable request doesn't it? I'm ready

to sign up, but first let me say my farewells. To this person, Jesus gives what seems to be his harshest response yet. He says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." He seems to be saying this call is so urgent that you don't even have time to explain to your nearest and dearest where you're going. But it's even more serious than that, I think. I think what he's saying is that this call is a call to lifelong commitment. It's a call that can't be put off and it's a call that once taken up mustn't be put down. It's no use deciding to follow Jesus and then reverting every now and then to your old lifestyle. It's no use committing your life to Jesus and a few years later deciding you've done enough and someone else can take over now.

You see as I look around the church today most of you are retired. Retired from paid employment that is. But you haven't retired from life I hope. In fact most people I know who are retired are busier now than they were when they were being paid. But the question is, are you busy doing God's work? Are you still committed to following Jesus along the way of the cross. As far as I can see it there's no biblical precedent for retiring from Christian ministry. We can all continue to minister for Jesus until our dying breath.

Jesus' call to go and proclaim the Kingdom of God continues to apply to us throughout our life. And the imperative just gets greater the older you get, because, let's face it, the time left for us is getting shorter.

What is the message today that we must hear, listen, respond and engage with?

What is God nudging in your heart, in all our hearts through his calling of us to be his followers?

There is a harvest that is ripe for the picking right outside these doors. Down this street. In our community. And yes, the labourers are few, and getting fewer, and are tired.

But Jesus is saying, don't give up. Don't look back, make excuses and do the same thing that has always been done in the past. Look back and celebrate, but turn and look to the future to all the possibilities that Christ has for you, for us

Don't look back.

Let us pray