

Jesus was a man on a mission. And a man on the move. He “set his face to go to Jerusalem”, and sent messengers ahead to tell people that he would be coming their way. The gospel passage crackles with a sense of purpose and urgency - and impatience. In fact, it is hard to hear today’s gospel passage without being taken aback by the way Jesus speaks to the would-be disciples; it seems so harsh and unreasonable. It does not sound like the loving and forgiving Jesus we think we know.

In our parish planning group that Jane Kirkpatrick is leading, we have been having conversations lately about things like the importance of being welcoming, and nurturing seekers. If someone came today who is just tentatively exploring what this Jesus-faith might be about, I wonder what they would be thinking of how Jesus spoke to people who wanted to follow him. “Let the dead bury their own dead.” That is pretty shocking.

(Sometimes I wonder about my luck in the gospel readings on the days I preach. Last time, Jesus was calling people who had come to hear him a nest of vipers. And now this!)

This is one of those bible passages that we really should consider in context instead of in isolation. I do not mean to gloss over Jesus’ words to the new followers – they were provocative at the time, and we should be challenged and disturbed by them today. But they are part of a larger story.

This passage represents a turning point in Luke and the beginning of a part of this gospel that is sometime called “Luke’s Special Section”. It contains stories and parables that are not found in the other gospels, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Thank God Luke recorded them for us! It is also sometimes called the “Journey Narrative”, because it begins with Jesus travelling toward Jerusalem, and ends with his arrival there. In fact, the weekly gospel readings this year, from now to late October, are from Luke’s special section.

Looking even more widely, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts really are two volumes of a single book, by the same author, about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the giving of the Spirit, and the early years of the church. It is a story that begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome, and its message to the people of Luke’s time would have been plain – that God’s mission is to the whole world. Throughout his gospel and the Book of Acts, Luke emphasizes repeatedly that the events he writes about are part of a divine plan that includes all human history.¹

This movement outward from ministry within Galilee, and within Judaism, to a mission to the world begins right here, in this passage. It starts with Jesus going to the Samaritans, who were foreigners and heretics in the eyes of Jews, and probably hated even more than the Romans. It is a mission of peace – Jesus chastised the disciples who want to bring down destruction on Samaritans who reject him.

“Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem”. It is a figure of speech from Hebrew, and it is no coincidence that it also is found in Isaiah (50:7), where the prophet wrote that the suffering servant of God “set his face like flint” against his persecutors. It speaks of purposefulness and unshakeable determination; it speaks of keeping eyes forward to the destination. In writing about this passage, Herbert O’Driscoll said that Jesus lived and did everything with a clear purpose. “That purpose was to communicate his vision of the Kingdom of God, and to embody that Kingdom in himself, in his words, in his actions, and in his whole being.”²

Jesus called disciples to communicate that vision, too, in their words and deeds and their whole being. God first in all things. Jesus knew better than any of the disciples just how difficult it would be to follow him. He already had met with rejection and threats. Now he was living on the road; he was on his way to the cross. Much of the Special Section of Luke is about Jesus equipping disciples to take up his mission and to be his church.³

You know, it is often the case that no one has confidence and enthusiasm and energy like a new convert. That happens today. As someone whose own return to faith is not that many years ago, I remember it well. Just

¹ John Drane. *Understanding the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 202.

² Herbert O’Driscoll, *Child of Peace, Lord of Life, Year C, Vol. 2* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1988), 143.

³ Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 91.

imagine what it would have been like to be in the physical presence of Jesus of Nazareth, to see the sick and the lame and the blind – even the dead – restored to health and life at his touch. Just imagine hearing him speak of the goodness of God and the coming of the Kingdom, and finding yourself believing. It would be euphoric. It would be so easy to say, “Let me come with you!” But when the first excitement has worn off, and the going is hard, and we are excluded, scorned and even threatened, can we hold firm?

Jesus would have known what was in the hearts of the three would-be disciples, but he wanted them to know. It is always a choice as to whether we follow when God calls, and we need to look honestly and unflinchingly into our hearts to make that choice. When you think about other “call” stories in the Bible, from Abraham through Moses to Isaiah to Jesus calling the twelve disciples, the choice is between looking back or looking ahead, and God always calls us to look forward. As said so beautifully in the words of our gradual hymn this morning: “Will you leave yourself behind, if I but call your name?”⁴ Jesus put choices in front of these three men – stark and disturbing choices in two of the cases - that would force them to think hard and deeply about how ready they were to set their faces to go to a new future, even to a cross.

Luke does not tell us how these men responded or what choices they made at that time, or whether Jesus really did or did not allow the time to take care of their family obligations. How they answered and what they did are really not what Luke wants his readers – you and me – to think about. He wants us to think about how we would answer. Don’t worry - I’m not going to ask for a show of hands!

Luke’s purpose in telling the story as he did was surely not to make us feel inadequate, but to make us think about what is truly important and about our relationship to God and to our neighbours, and what we are called to do for God and each other. For almost everyone, going toward the place we hear God is calling us to be is a journey that lasts a lifetime.

We are after all the products of our world. That was true of the people around Jesus, and it is true of all of us. In our time, we have been socialized into a materialistic culture and self-centred culture, and a culture where just about everyone is so busy that we hardly have time for God or the people we love most. (That is what Paul means by the “flesh”). It is hard even to imagine a world in the terms that Jesus confronts us with. Jesus has freed us from sin and death, but as an old African-American saying goes, “it’s easier to get the slave out of slavery than it is to get the slavery out of the slave.”⁵ Gods knows us, and knows our frailties like these.

As followers of Jesus we are called just as those early disciples were to go with him on his mission, and more than that, we are called to continue his mission in the world on his behalf.

But none of us - not you, not me – no one of us does it alone. We do it as church, as community of people who share in the one Holy Spirit. In the Galatians passage today, Paul talks about the fruits of the Spirit, and they are all about relationships that uphold and energize, nurture and heal – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Despite the daunting tone of the passage we heard today, Luke’s gospel does not contradict Paul’s beautiful, joyful picture of community in the Spirit. Luke’s gospel is considered to be the happiest gospel. Over and over, Luke wrote of the happiness of being a Christian, from the angel announcing tidings of great joy, to the parables with happy endings, to the disciples returning to Jerusalem after Jesus ascension “with great joy” and “continually blessing God.” (Lk. 24:52-53)⁶

Over the centuries when the Christian Church was so firmly entrenched as a fundamental institution of Western Society, I think it forgot the call to mission in the world, and when it did take up that call it was too often tangled up with extending the power of the dominant classes and cultures. Now that we are living in a more secularized world, where so many have either drifted away from church or have had no contact at all with church, there is a reawakening of mission in new ways.

Even so, Tim Dearborn, theology professor and a senior leader in World Vision, has given us a note of warning in his book about mission. He wrote: “It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of

⁴ John Bell, “Will You Come and Follow Me?” (The Iona Community, G.I.A. Publications, Inc., 1987)

⁵ Ched Myers, “On Earth as in Heaven”, DVD, TEARAustralia.

⁶ Drane, 203

mission that has a church in the world.”⁷ In other words, the purpose of mission is not the glory of the church, or to build up the church, although I hope and believe it will do that, but it is to continue the work that Christ called us to do by his teaching and self-sacrificing example in and for the world.

Some years ago, the Anglican Communion came up with the five general areas of mission, the “Five Marks of Mission” that have been printed in the bulletin most Sundays for some time now:

- To proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.
- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers.
- To respond to human need by loving service.
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society.
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Are we taking up that call? I think we are, and have been for some time, and are doing more and more with our services to people of the community outside the church – Food Bank, Community Meals, Meals on Wheels volunteers, connecting with community groups and agencies around social services and advocating with our political leaders for social justice. And you will think of many more examples.

But it is just a beginning. There is a wonderful quote from Roman Catholic priest Vincent Donovan, who learned much about mission work from his experiences working with the Masai people in Africa, and has applied the wisdom he gained to how we should engage with communities outside our parishes today. Father Donovan wrote: “do not call [people] back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, beautiful as that place may seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you or they have been before.”⁸ Again, from the words of our gradual hymn: “Will you go where you don’t know and never be the same?”⁹

We will, with God’s help.

- *The Rev’d Tom Patterson*

⁷ Tim Dearborn, *Beyond Duty: A Passion for Christ and a Heart for Mission* (MARC, 1997), quoted in *Mission-Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), 85.

⁸ Fr. Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 2nd ed. (SCM Press, 2001), preface, quoted in *Mission-Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), 93.

⁹ Bell, “Will You Come and Follow Me?”