

## LUKE 9:51-62 ST JAMES'; 26.6.16; 11.00 am

### INTRODUCTION

Who likes playing 'follow-my-leader'? As you know, its very simple: everyone follows one behind the other, and copies whatever the person right at the front is doing as they move around.

Following Jesus is rather more challenging, as we heard from Luke's gospel. Let's think a little more about what Jesus had to say to those who were already following him, to those who offered to follow him, and to those whom he called to follow him.

### THE LESSON TO THOSE ALREADY FOLLOWING

Jesus has *resolutely set out for Jerusalem* (v 51). With him are travelling the twelve apostles, and presumably a larger group of disciples. Immediately after this passage, we read that Jesus sends 70 or 72 people ahead of him – so there must be at least that many people travelling with him.

In those days, people who were travelling could expect to be made welcome and given food and shelter by people in the towns and villages they travelled through. Jesus' group was obviously larger than most; it wouldn't be easy for a small village to host 70 plus people without warning. So Jesus sends messengers ahead to warn the locals of what they could expect.

James and John are incensed when one village refuses to give them shelter. Tensions between Samaritans and Jews in those days ran as

high as those between Palestinians and Israelis today. Jesus and his friends were on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. As far as the villagers were concerned, anyone travelling to Jerusalem for the Jewish religious festivals was not welcome. But James and John are all for calling *fire down from heaven to destroy them* (v 54). They're convinced that such a prayer would be answered, which shows great faith in Jesus! Many Christians today could learn from James and John's zeal and devotion. But the lesson they have to learn here is that Jesus doesn't judge people who don't know what they're doing. The lesson to those already following Jesus is that they have to be prepared to accept hostility, without retaliating, or wanting revenge. As followers of Jesus, we're called to serve people, we're not called to judge them.

### THE LESSONS TO THOSE WHO OFFERED TO FOLLOW

In the second part of this passage, we read about three people whom Jesus meets as he travels. One of them Jesus calls to follow him (v 59). The other two seem to offer themselves (vv 57 & 61). We'll come back to the one whom Jesus calls. Let's think first about the two who want to come with him, and the lessons they have to learn before they can follow Jesus.

*As they were walking along the road, a man said to [Jesus], 'I will follow you wherever you go'* (v 57). There doesn't seem to be a problem here. The would-be follower doesn't lay down any conditions, or try to make excuses. He's prepared to go with Jesus wherever he goes. But Jesus can see into people's hearts! His reply shows that he can see that this man hasn't really grasped what following Jesus will mean:

*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head* (v 58). Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He's on the move. He'll be sleeping in other people's houses or in inns. He won't be settling anywhere. Anyone who's following Jesus will have to accept these conditions, and Jesus could see that this particular man hasn't stopped to think how this would affect his life. The lesson he has to learn is to think through the consequences of deciding to follow Jesus, and to be prepared to give up the comfort and security of home.

This doesn't mean that Jesus requires all his followers to lead a nomadic existence! Most of us will be called to stay where we are. But in one sense every one of Jesus' followers is homeless in this world. Our home is in heaven. We're just travelling through this world. In the words of the writer to the Hebrews, believers are *aliens and strangers on earth* who are *longing for a better country - a heavenly one* (Hebrews 11:13,16). True followers of Jesus will never be able to feel settled and at home, because in this world we aren't settled or at home.

Home and family ties are also an issue for the other person who offers to follow Jesus: *I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family* (v 61). It seems like a reasonable request.

Surely Jesus doesn't expect anyone just to take off without at least letting their family know where they're going! But saying goodbye to people at home wouldn't have just been a quick 'bye, I'm off'. It would have involved days and days of parties. The time of departure would have been put off again and again, and actually leaving would have become ever more difficult.

Jesus is uncompromising: *No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God* (v 62). I'm told that ploughing a straight furrow involves keeping one's eyes fixed firmly on the marker at the other end of the field. If the ploughman looks back over his shoulder, the plough will go wandering all over the place. The lesson which this would-be follower has to learn is that followers of Jesus must be prepared to leave family and friends behind. Like soldiers who are called to fight, we must be prepared to give up some of the joys of family life. Back in the days of Moses, the people of Israel continually moaned that life in the desert was hard, and that they'd been better off back in Egypt. If we do the same, we'll be like a ploughman looking back over his shoulder, and the work we do won't be fit for the kingdom of God.

### **THE LESSON TO THE ONE CALLED TO FOLLOW**

The second man Jesus meets as he travels along the road doesn't offer to follow Jesus; Jesus calls him: *Follow me*. But this man isn't ready to drop everything and go with Jesus, either. *Lord, first let me go and bury my father*, he says (v 59).

Again, this seems like a reasonable request. Especially as for Jews in Jesus' day, there was a sacred duty to give one's parents an honoured burial. The duty of burial took precedence over studying the law, service in the Temple, killing the Passover sacrifice and observing circumcision.

But we need to bear a few things in mind. Firstly, we don't know for sure that this man's father is already dead. It may be that he's not

asking for a short delay while he attends his father's funeral, but that he's putting off following Christ until his father dies and has been buried. Secondly, Jesus himself taught that looking after our parents is a God-given duty, and that we can't use religion as an excuse to neglect our duty to our parents. If we're truly following Christ as our leader, then he will ensure that we do take care of our parents.

This man was making two mistakes. Firstly, he felt that burying his father was something he had to do *before* following Jesus. But Jesus is God's Son, and he has the first call on our lives. If anyone thinks s/he has something to do which is more important than following Jesus, they're showing that they have no real concept of who Jesus is.

Secondly, this man was asking to put off following Jesus until he'd buried his father – in other words he had no concept of how urgent and important was the task to which Jesus was calling him. Jesus was calling him to *go and proclaim the kingdom of God* (v 60). Everyone desperately needs to hear that message – including this man's father.

The father's eternal destiny depended on responding to this proclamation. So putting off following Jesus and proclaiming his message until his father was dead and buried would be a very strange way of fulfilling his duty to his father. This man's sense of duty to his father was a false sense of duty, a sense of duty imposed by the social and religious conventions of the world, not imposed by the requirements of God's law or the gospel.

## **CONCLUSION**

No-one ever promised that following Jesus would be easy! As Jesus' followers, we have to be prepared to learn all these lessons for ourselves. We're called to serve people, and not to retaliate or take revenge when they reject us because we're following Jesus. We're called to be prepared to give up home comforts and security, to be prepared to leave family and friends behind, and to put Jesus' call on our lives above everything else. Most of us won't be called actually to do any of this. For most of us, following Christ will mean living our lives at home, amongst our family and friends. God created us to live in families and communities. But every one of us has to be prepared to leave it all behind, should Jesus call us to do so. Jesus is challenging each one of us, 'Suppose I were to ask you to do something for me which goes against your customs, something of which your family and friends wouldn't approve? Or suppose I were to call you to do something which was so urgent that you'd have to leave your nearest and dearest without an explanation? Would you come?' It comes down a question of who and what is most important in your life – your home comforts, your family and friends, or your Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ?