

Text: Luke 9v51-62 and Philippians 2:1-8

Sunday 15th March 2020

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The metaphor of 'journeying with God' is used time and time again in the Scriptures, and often we talk of faith as being a journey. So, it's this very idea which Luke draws upon as he writes these words in chapter 9: 'As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.' (Luke 9:51) Other versions talk of Jesus 'setting His face to go to Jerusalem.' With steely resolve, with a clear and fixed understanding of His purpose, Jesus journeys towards Jerusalem.

Earlier in the same chapter, Luke has outlined that Jesus knows His purpose and He knows what is coming:...

Jesus said to His disciples, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.' (Luke 9:22)

Jesus knows what lies ahead of Him; He knows with certainty the suffering He will face so as to accomplish the purpose and will of His Father, and to that end Jesus resolutely sets out for Jerusalem, He sets His face.

So, over the coming weeks between now and Easter, we will journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem, and along the way we will see some of the people He met and explore as well, the teaching Jesus shared along the way. This will give us the opportunity to reflect upon the reaction of people towards Jesus and see if we react similarly...

We'll also have the opportunity to hear what Jesus taught about being His disciple and weigh up if we are walking in His way today. But primarily, I hope that in this season, as we journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem, we will also see the heart of Jesus, the character of Jesus, and so grow in our own love of Jesus.

Now, this isn't some nice mental exercise, this isn't divorced from reality, because what we see of Jesus, what we see of His way and of His calling upon us as His disciples, is relevant for today and for the issues we wrestle with as a church family.

It's been some time since I've mentioned the issue, but we must remember that from this year we will start to see an impact upon our church life as things change within the Braes area...

Likely I will become Interim Moderator for another Kirk Session on the 1st of July this year, so my available time here in Brightons will reduce. Also, we were meant to have a meeting tomorrow as the Braes Churches to explore some of the issues, but that has been replaced with an alternative process, not because of coronavirus but simply a more participative approach, and in all likelihood, God-willing, there will be a meeting in August when we might need to decide as a group of Kirk Sessions what the future shape of ministry will be in the Braes area. This will ask us to sacrifice things, we will have to give things up, and change from what we've known to a model that's only now beginning to be piloted. What guidance might the way of Jesus and His example have upon our thinking and our planning as we follow His journey towards Jerusalem?

But even within our own congregation we are wrestling with significant issues. The elders are seeking clarity on what our purpose is as a congregation, as well as the values that underpin how that purpose should be worked out amongst us. We need to do this because we don't have clarity on this, we don't know what we are about or the manner we seek to accomplish it. And in case that sounds a bit vague, then let me try and make it a bit more concrete.

At present, the Kirk Session have made a plan, God-willing, to meet on the 31st March for an extra meeting, and we'll be discussing then the place of children, the place of adults, the idea of us being all generations together and we will seek to come to resolution of this, because we know there are differing perspectives about this matter...

For example, we need to make a plan about the summer services: will they be all age, or will they not? Other than personal preference or who shouts the loudest, we do not have a way to answer that questions, because we are not clear on our purpose and we are not clear on our values, and we're not even necessarily on the same page about how we do life together as all the generations who make up Brightons Parish Church.

Once again, what guidance might the way of Jesus and His example have upon our thinking and our planning as we follow His journey towards Jerusalem? I don't really know yet, I don't have it all planned out, but I know today speaks a powerful word to these very issues and questions.

So, let's dig into our passage for today. Jesus is resolutely setting out for Jerusalem and He first comes to a Samaritan village. It's helpful if we know some of the background here. **Around the year 700BC**, the Assyrian Empire invaded and conquered the northern land of Israel, and Assyria resettled that land with its own people, such that the Jews who were left there intermarried with those of non-Jewish nationality, which brought about a mixed race who became known as Samaritans. They were viewed as "half breeds" by the more "purebred" Jewish people, and in turn the Samaritans developed a hatred for the Jews. Indeed, such was the tension between the two peoples that Jewish travellers would walk around Samaritan territory rather than go through it, even though this would lengthen their trip considerably. **To these people**, Jesus goes.

But ahead of Him, He sends an advance group, to get ready things for His arrival because at this point it's not just Jesus and the 12 disciples any more, as Luke chapter 8 reveals, there is now Jesus, the 12 apostles and 'many others'. Such a large group will need special preparations for accommodation and meals, and so Jesus sends some of the people head.

However, they seem to let slip that Jesus is heading for Jerusalem and the reply they get is that Jesus and His followers are not welcome in the village. We don't really know why and Luke's focus is not so much on the response of the Samaritans, but on the disciples' reaction. James and John, who are brothers, call **out to Jesus and ask: 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' (Luke 9:54)**

There is a degree to which their reaction makes some sense. For example, earlier in chapter 9, we read that some people thought Jesus was a prophet akin to the prophet Elijah, and everyone knew the stories of Elijah – he was the one who called down fire on Mount Carmel, he was the one who called down fire on enemy soldiers sent to capture him. So, to some degree, we might argue that the reaction from James and John is one of great faith – faith that Jesus is a prophet like Elijah, even greater than Elijah, because enough fire might be sent to burn a whole village!

What is more, Jesus had earlier said in the same chapter, that if people did not welcome the disciples they were to ‘shake the dust off your feet’ and walk away. Maybe, James and John thought they were honouring Jesus even more,...

because not only are they willing to shake the dust of this village off their feet, they are also willing to reduce this village to dust, and surely such a response is fitting when people reject the coming of God in their very midst? In a culture of honour and shame, surely such irreverence towards Jesus demands the strongest of responses? Maybe it was this reaction from the brothers which **coined their nickname**, 'the sons of thunder' (Mark 3:17).

Do you ever feel like James and John? Do you ever get annoyed with the disrespect shown to Jesus? Do you stand up to defend Jesus? Defending His honour, defending His praise, defending His rightful place? Well, James and John were just about to realise how different Jesus was from Elijah - He might come in the Spirit and...

power of Elijah, but these disciples still have much to learn about the way of Jesus, for Jesus ‘turned and rebuked them.’ (Luke 9:55)

He turned – maybe Jesus was already out in front of His disciples, heading for the next village, but here they are, calling Him back, pestering Him with their agenda, with their grand ideas, dictating to Jesus what they thought HE should be doing and how matters of religion should be done. Instead, Jesus rebukes them and they go to another village.

It’s a funny thought, because John is the apostle we so often associate with **love, for he wrote, ‘Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.**

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.’ (1 John 4:7-8)

And yet, here in Luke, John is advocating anything but love. He still has much to learn about the love of Jesus; he still needs to learn that Jesus, that God, is love and that divine love is full of grace.

Our second reading today, from the letter to the Philippians, spells out for us the depth and nature of the love of Jesus. It’s a love which does nothing out of selfish ambition; it’s a love that looks not to its own interests but to the interests of others; His is a love which made Himself nothing, becoming a servant, and with such humility became obedient to death, even death on a cross. The disciples of Luke chapter 9,...

perceive Jesus to be the promised Messiah, but they expect Him to be the triumphant, all conquering, resistance crushing King of popular opinion, even though Jesus had earlier taught them about love of enemy and that He came to die for the purposes of God. For as Jesus will later say, He came to seek and to save the lost, and to do that by the giving of His life. The way of Jesus is the way of grace, which is so strong, so wide-ranging, so patient, so self-sacrificing that it is surprising, shocking, even scandalous, to the disciples and especially to the religious people of His time.

I wonder: what's your picture of Jesus? How wide-ranging, how scandalous, is His grace in your thinking? And do you show that grace to others?

I remember reading a story one time that is told by a sociologist and pastor called Tony Campolo. In his story, Campolo was traveling to speak in Honolulu, Hawaii. He says that because of jet lag on the first night he got up at 3 o'clock in the morning and went to a nearby restaurant. It wasn't the most desirable or upscale place you could encounter and when he went in an unshaven cook with a cigar in his mouth asked him what he would like and Campolo asked for a cup of coffee and donut, because that's all he dared to try.

As he sat eating his doughnut and drinking his coffee, about a dozen prostitutes walked in and sat down. Campolo said he tried to disappear, but they were on either side of him and he couldn't help but overhear their conversation. One of the prostitutes said,...

“tomorrow is my birthday.” Another of the women with her said sarcastically, “so what you want, a cake? You want us to throw you a party?” The woman responded, “I’m just saying it’s my birthday. You don’t have to hurt my feelings.” And then she said, “I’ve never had a birthday party in my whole life.”

Eventually, they all got up and left. So, Campolo called over to the cook and asked, “Shall we have a party for that woman?” And the Cook responded, “That’s Agnes. That’s a great idea. That’s beautiful. We’ll have a party. I’ll make the cake.”

So, that’s what they did. Campolo came back the next morning at about 2:15 AM, with crêpe paper and a big sign that said HAPPY BIRTHDAY AGNES...

They put the word out on the street, and by 3:15, Campolo says, every prostitute in town was packed inside that restaurant. At 3:30 AM, right on time, in walked Agnes with her friends and everybody in the restaurant shouted out, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY AGNES.”

Agnes was stunned. She sat down on a stool, as the group sang to her ‘happy birthday’. When they had finished, the cook brought out the cake, but Agnes was in tears and could not blow out the candles, so the cook did. He handed her a knife and said, “cut the cake Agnes.” But she asked, “is it okay if I don’t cut the cake? I want to show it to my mum. She lives just around the corner.” Campolo said to her, “It’s your cake. Do as you like.” And she told the group that she would be right back and she left.

Campolo said that as she left the room, it was dead silent. Awkward. So Campolo asked, “why don’t we pray?” And hearing no objection, he did. He prayed for Agnes. He prayed that she might be sealed and delivered from all the pain in her life. He prayed that God would make her new.

When he was done, the cook said, “You said you were a sociologist but you’re a preacher. What kind of church do you preach in?”

And Campolo said it was one of those times where he got the right words at the right moment. He replied, “I preach in a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3.30 in the morning.”

And the cook said, “No you don’t. No, you don’t. Because I’d go to a church like that.”

Brothers and sisters, are we a church like that? Are we a congregation of radical grace, of scandalous grace? You will only show that grace if you see Jesus as the God of such grace and know that grace for yourself. Are we a church of scandalous grace? A church of such grace that the love we show is a love which does nothing out of selfish ambition; a love that doesn’t look to its own interests but to the interests of others; a love which calls us to be servants of all, and embody such humility that we are willing to become obedient to death and take up our cross daily. Are we that church? Are we the church of scandalous grace? And in this time with coronavirus, will we show that grace to our neighbour and community?

Now, it's such grace and love, which underpins and fuels the second part of our reading in Luke's gospel today. Jesus encounters three would be disciples and with each their commitment is shown to be lacking.

The first is full of enthusiasm, confidently asserting that he will follow Jesus wherever Jesus may lay his head. Maybe the individual thinks of Jesus as an itinerant teacher who will open for doors for him, teach him the ways of God that life might then be good. Along the way, there will be comfortable places to stay, respect will be experienced because this man will be following in the shadow of this famous Jesus.

But Jesus points out, that to follow Him, is to follow a prophet who calls people to faithfulness to God...

For Jesus knows no comfort, He will depend on the generosity of others; the Lord of the whole universe is made poor, is humbled to the position of a servant, all for the love of mankind, because for them He comes to give His life to seek and save the lost.

The second individual first asks to go and bury his father, which was the sign of highest respect in Jewish culture and even commanded by Scripture. One commentator suggests that if the father had actually died already, it would be more likely that the man would be at home, rather than with Jesus, the man would be busy with funeral preparation, too busy to be with Jesus. So, in all likelihood, the man was asking to stay at home until his father had died. This might have meant a significant delay and the call of Jesus being put off until a more opportune time. The man is saying, “yes, I’ll follow You Jesus...but later.”

Once again, commitment is lacking and failure to understand Jesus and the importance of His mission is apparent.

Finally, the third individual, who seems to ask a fair request, a request also raised by Elijah when Elijah was called by God, and Elijah was allowed to go home and say his farewells. But Jesus, once again, says that such a request is not fitting for the times we now find ourselves in. We're not to look back, we're not to plough with one eye behind and one eye out front; instead full commitment, full focus upon the priorities of the kingdom, is crucial for disciples of Jesus.

In summary of these three individuals, we see that Jesus is looking for disciples who are willing to follow His example,...

giving up comfort, giving up tradition and family expectation, even what might appear religiously correct, and giving up life as we knew it, so that we, one and all, may follow Jesus wherever He leads and share in His purposes to make the Kingdom known.

Do we share the urgency of Jesus? Are we willing to give up comfort, tradition, expectation, life as we know it, to fulfil the mandate given to us by Jesus? Because, imagine if Jesus had done that? Imagine if Jesus had said, “You know Father, I’d rather not; the comfort of heaven, it’s rather good; and I’d be breaking tradition for angels not to worship me; and the idea of pain, crucifixion, becoming a man...seems a bit undignified, I think I’ll pass.”

I mean – come on!?! Imagine if Jesus had been like that, and thank the Lord He wasn’t!

Instead, He did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, humbling himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

He gave up comfort; He gave up all that was rightfully His; He gave up life as He knew it and entered into our pain and suffering and world – for love you and love of me, to seek and to save the lost. He calls His disciples, He calls us, to walk in His way, and show such commitment as He did to the Kingdom of God.

I wonder, is being a Christian, is being a disciple of Jesus, merely another commitment, another title, which we add to the long list of our other commitments?

Because Jesus is calling for Him and His kingdom to become our number one commitment, and our lives to be ordered around that.

Or when it comes to clarifying our purpose as church, or what our values are, or how we might relate with our sister churches in the Braes area, will Jesus and His Kingdom be the deciding factor? Or, is it going to be what makes us comfortable, or our traditions, expectations and even life as we knew it? Are we going our way, or are we following in the way of Jesus?

As we begin this journey with Jesus towards Easter, with Jesus setting His face and resolutely following the path to Jerusalem, that place where He would give His life in sacrifice for us,...

I pray we might learn His way the way of scandalous grace that calls us to give our all for the sake of the Kingdom of God, that God who gave His life for you and for me.

May it be so. Amen.