

## Follow me – Pentecost 5

*2 Kings 2:1–2, 6–14; Psalm 77:1–2, 11–20; Galatians 5:1, 13–25; Luke 9:51–62*

Once a family was driving on a route that wasn't very familiar to them, when a heavy fog descended. Dad slowed down and put the car lights on, but to their surprise another car confidently overtook them. Dad said: Mmm, that driver seems to know the way well; it will make things easier for me if I just follow those tail lights. So he did quite comfortably for some distance. But suddenly there was a big bump and the sound of wood splintering. Dad's car had hit the other one, pushing it through the other end of its own garage.

Who we follow and how closely we follow does matter. Sometimes, as Julia Gillard found this week, the time comes to review where we're heading. Maybe some of you have been burnt by following someone else's ideas or advice too closely. On the other hand, following a worthy leader or mentor or hero can be a very positive experience, even a life-changing experience. Jesus says: Follow me!

I remember when I had young school children being part of teams putting on five-day Holiday Happenings in school holidays in Canberra. The planning and preparation and praying and presenting for a daily program of activities and Christian teaching for many children, as well as being organised for my own three and keeping a household running, required considerable commitment and energy. Early in my first Holiday Happening, the team leader asked us in addition to organise an evening for parents, and to each prepare some supper for it. At that point, something inside me cried out NO, ENOUGH. But I knew the director didn't ask more of us than she was giving herself, and I knew we had a number of people praying for us. So I did find the reserves to be able to 'go the extra mile', as it were. I grew as a Christian through that experience, discovering as I have since rediscovered many,

many times, that when God calls us he equips us, and doesn't test us beyond what we're able to endure.

The gospel reading today about would-be followers of Jesus reminds us that Jesus' call to follow him is no romantic invitation to live happily ever after. It's a serious call to commitment, to perseverance, to single-minded discipleship in which we spend a lifetime learning to be more like Jesus, growing into the person God knows we can each be.

To the person who said rashly: 'I will follow you wherever you go', Jesus responded: 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. Jesus is not a tour guide, taking people by air-conditioned coach to the next luxurious hotel. Followers are much more likely to have to rough it, trudging along the road and sleeping where they can, or whatever the equivalent challenge or deprivation might be for us today. In addition, like Jesus, who had set his face towards Jerusalem and his passion, followers often find that the destination is not one of their choosing.

To the one who said: 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father', Jesus replied: 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Jesus' replies to these would-be disciples seem sharp, tough and unreasonable. The Jews had a saying in their Talmud, *If you are planting a tree, and someone comes rushing up to tell you that the Messiah has come, first finish planting the tree, and then go see if the Messiah has indeed come.* And the burial of a member of one's family took precedence over most obligations set out in the Torah. It's interesting how often in the gospels discipleship is set over against some aspect of home or family or family obligation. Is Jesus saying that family isn't important? No, but often his call to us is to choose not between him and the worst, but between him and the otherwise best. Jesus himself, obeying the one who sent him, would

shortly be saying to his closest friends: 'I am with you only a little longer. Where I am going you cannot come.' Saying goodbye wasn't easy for him, but the task God had for him had to come first.

In the same vein, a third person said to Jesus: 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' This time Jesus replied: 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.' Again, Jesus wasn't asking any more of his followers than he asked of himself. Lasting the distance to complete what God has called us to do can be more than we can bear; more than we can bear alone, that is. Didn't Jesus pray desperately in the Garden of Gethsemane: Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.'

Jesus said these hard things to would-be disciples not because he was uncaring, but because he cared enough to be honest, to be demanding, to say up front that following him would cost us everything we hold dear. I'm sure many of you could tell of personal and family costs of following Jesus. But the rewards are greater than the costs, and the one who calls us is faithful.

In his personal journal, *Markings*, Dag Hammarskjöld recorded the following:

I don't know Who – or what – put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering it. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. From that moment on I have known what it means 'not to look back,' and 'to take no thought for the morrow.'

I've noticed in my life that God seems to call me to do things I've admired others doing and have thought to myself: 'I could never do that.' This began happening to me when I was young. When people asked what I was going to do when I grew up, I'd say, in summary, 'I don't know, but I'm not going to be a teacher.' Guess what I became. Looking back, I can see how this happened a number of times over the years, including when I was working closely with clergy in parish ministry as parish administrator while I was completing my studies at St Mark's. I admired my two clergy colleagues, but I also saw their struggles and the set-backs and challenges they had to confront, and thought, 'That's not for me'.

Earlier, as our children were growing up enough to be left with grandparents, John and I had the opportunity of a trip to England and France at a time when I was weighing up the possibility of doing full-time theological training with the purpose of equipping myself better for the Religious Education in schools and other things I was doing. In London, in a Sunday service at All Souls' Langham Place, John and I were sitting in a side gallery looking down as the young curate stood up to preach. He began by telling us he was starting a series of sermons on the book of Isaiah, and told us some things he'd just learned about Isaiah. I thought to myself: 'I knew all of that.' I'd just been leading a women's Bible Study group in a series on Isaiah. The next part is harder to describe, but something unwelcome hit me in the gut with great force, which if it had to be put into words said: 'I could do what he's doing. That could be me standing there'. I didn't want to know about it. I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to do anything about it. So I didn't. I dismissed it from my mind as much as possible and didn't tell anyone about the experience for a couple of years, by which time I was at theological college and God was gently but persistently communicating to me by various means that he wanted me to be ordained. To cut a long story short, eventually I said yes, but even so I still found it a daunting step when 18 years ago I was

actually facing ordination as a priest. However, despite the way being far from smooth at times, I've known ever since then that there was no other way for me to go, and I have no regrets about responding to that call.

Luke's conception of the life of Christian faith is that of a pilgrimage or a journey. The disciple of Jesus must be willing to be always on the move, unencumbered by a need for security or by other loyalties, even other commitments or obligations which of themselves seem good and worthwhile.

So whatever form your current call to follow Jesus may take, remember the words of the sentence we heard at the beginning of the service: Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Jesus' sake will find it.

#### Prayer of the Day

O God,  
the light of the minds that know you,  
the life of the souls that love you,  
the strength of the thoughts that seek you:  
help us so to know you that we may truly love you,  
and so to love you that we may fully serve you,  
whose service is perfect freedom;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen