

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

1 Kings 19. 15-16, 19-21

Galatians 5. 1, 13-25

Luke 9. 51-62

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Every once in a while we come across a surprising depiction of our Lord in the gospels. It doesn't happen frequently. Most of the time, after a while, we get a general sense of what's going on in the passage; but in today's reading from St Luke's gospel, we see something strange.

As the scene opens, we find that some of the disciples (called 'messengers') have been travelling throughout the surrounding area, telling people about Jesus. This geographical area includes a village of the Samaritans, where the disciples went in order to prepare it for Christ's arrival. But the Samaritans would not receive them. They were inhospitable to our Lord and his followers; so James and John, with their characteristic militancy, wanted to kill all of them. They ask Jesus, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' (Lk 9. 54).

The two disciples are referring to an event recounted in the second book of the Kings, in which Elijah calls down a firestorm from the sky to kill a group of fifty soldiers of a king who had turned away from the God of Israel; and then, to make the point more clearly, he kills the next fifty, too (1. 9-12).

This is the punishment by Elijah that James and John are referring to. Like Elijah, they are also in Samaria. There, with this recalcitrant group, the two disciples want to imitate Elijah's response; but Jesus says no. No more of that. That is not what he is aiming to do. Instead, he says (and this is related in some versions of Luke 9,

but not the one we have before us), ‘The Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings, but to save them’ (9. 56, KJV).

Personally, I would tend to think that this is a nice thing to say. It paints a picture of Christ who, in modern terms, we might say is ‘tolerant’. Tolerant of other people with different beliefs; willing to go along with a diversity of opinion. So the Samaritans don’t want to receive our Lord? Fine. He just goes on to the next place instead, without further discussion.

Then it begins to seem like maybe it isn’t such a nice thing after all. After a short time, they come across other people and, unlike the Samaritans, these people are aspiring disciples. They don’t want to resist Jesus; on the contrary, they want to be his followers. They are drawn to him. They see in him possibilities for life; for new life; for life with God. Whatever preparatory work the disciples have done with them has really taken hold, and they are ready to follow Christ, wherever he goes.

And suddenly, the seeming tolerance that our Lord had expressed to the Samaritans evaporates. The ‘live-and-let-live’ attitude disappears. He doesn’t welcome these other aspiring disciples. He doesn’t say, ‘Hey, glad you’re on board, I look forward to working with you’. Instead, to the first he promises a life of recurring instability; to the second he prohibits the fulfilment of burial duties; and to the third he says that his desire to say goodbye to his family makes him unworthy for the kingdom of God.

It wasn’t so for Elijah and Elisha in today’s reading from 1 Kings (1 Kings 19. 15-16, 19-21). After Elisha was ordained, he told Elijah that he wanted to go say goodbye to his family. Elijah responds cryptically, but not obviously critically. Elisha says goodbye and then he and Elijah continue with their ministry. Elisha’s hesitancy didn’t make him unworthy of anything, it seems.

Elijah was indulgent and understanding with his friend and *protégé*, but he would show himself to be vindictive with his enemies. Jesus, on the other hand, gave grace and mercy to his enemies, but was harsh and inflexible with his friends. It's as if he is saying, if you want to follow Christ, you will be his servant and *nothing else*, to a shocking degree.

It is especially shocking with the second aspiring disciple who wanted to bury his father. This is, I think, an understandable desire. The burial of the dead is an act of mercy. Not being cared for after death is understood as one of the worst things that can happen to a person. In the book of the prophet Jeremiah, a lack of burial is the vile curse levelled at a disobedient people: the prophet says, 'they shall not be buried, and no one will lament for them' (16. 4-6; 25. 33). In the book of Ezekiel, the Valley of Dry Bones is what is left of unburied fallen soldiers, and their lack of burial is one of the things that makes the scene so desolate (chapter 37). After our Lord's death, the gospels make a point of naming Joseph of Arimathea as the person who treated Jesus's body with respect, wrapping it in linen and putting it in the tomb.

The burial of any dead person is an act of mercy, but the burial of one's parent, as far as it is possible, is a matter of divine decree. Remember that in the Ten Commandments, the commandment to honour one's father and mother is the first of the duties to other human beings that appears. Before the prohibitions against murder, or adultery, or stealing, there is first 'Honour your father and your mother' (Ex 20. 12). And the obligation to arrange for burial is among the most important duties of this most important commandment. This is what the aspiring disciple wanted to do.

And to all of this Christ says, 'Let the dead bury their own dead'. A good-hearted man who loves our Lord wants to bury his father. 'Let the dead bury their own dead'. The man wants to obey a religious commandment. He wants to honour the

one who raised him. He wants to praise the one who loved him. He wants to accord his father the respect he deserves. 'Let the dead bury their own dead'.

But let us not forget another saying of our Lord, to which I referred a moment ago. It should be held in counterpoint to the points I have just made. Jesus says, 'The Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them'.

Christ wants to save our lives. Wherever death reigns, wherever evil persists, and wherever suffering occurs, our Lord himself wants to be there, with us and for us. For the sins that keep us alienated from God, he offers absolute forgiveness. The Spirit of God who moved upon the face of the waters at creation moves among the people of God today with sanctifying love. The Father to whom Jesus prayed has adopted us as his beloved, the people for whom he would do anything. No more sin. No more death. No more darkness. Life eternal in the land of light and joy, in the presence of the triune God.

Christ loves us and he wants to save our lives. All he asks of his disciples, those who love him back, is that they give him everything. Amen.