

The Preaching Conference we attended at Carey College was all I hoped it would be and more. 140 people all up and 4 from Otago-Southland. The two key speakers were inspirational and the electives for the most part were stimulating. There were four things which I guess I knew but were affirmed as we participated:

We have a great, big wonderful God
 We have a Mighty Saviour Jesus
 Through the Bible God speaks
 And when preached in the power of the Spirit God's word changes things.

Did I need to go to Auckland to hear this? Well it was refreshing, encouraging, stimulating and challenging all at the same time.

At the last session William Willamon preached from Luke 4:14-30 when Jesus announced his mission in the synagogue in Nazareth; after Jesus challenges them by saying this promise is fulfilled in me, the crowd tried to push him over a cliff. Verse 30 states: **'But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.'** Willamon spoke about Jesus going on his way and concluded with a personal experience.

'Early in the New Year a couple in his church rang and said you've got to talk to our daughter Janie. Janie had been away studying and she was in her third year of College which is what they call university in the US of A. She'd rung them to say she was leaving College, starting on a one year nursing course and then going to work in a hospital in Honduras.'

Willamon rang her and said all the right things – you can't do this, think of your parents, think of what it's cost you so far – every reasonable argument we older people muster when a young person has such a hair-brained idea. Janie said, 'it's too late, I've left College, signed up for the nursing course and the hospital says they have a place for me next year. After Willamon remonstrated with her a bit longer he asked where she got the idea from.'

Janie said, 'you know last Christmas when you were preaching about Mary and what it cost her to be Jesus' mother..... That really spoke to me and this is my response to what you said.'

'But Janie, I was only preaching.'

Prayer

On the 6th of December last year we concluded our time in Luke with the verse - **As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.** We pick Luke up today at this point.

Luke 9:51-62

51 As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. 52 And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; 53 but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. 54 When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' 55 But Jesus turned and rebuked them. 56 Then he and his disciples went to another village.

57 As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'
58 Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'
59 He said to another man, 'Follow me.'

But he replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'

60 Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'

61 Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.'

62 Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'

'Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.' Now the cross looms over every word.

Rejection by the Samaritans (51-56) leads into some tough teaching about discipleship (57-62). As the disciples focus on the rejecting Samaritans, Jesus turns the focus back on the disciples and the fierce demands of being one. And the challenge isn't always turning from bad to good; sometimes the challenge Jesus poses requires us to turn from a reasonable good towards the good of discipleship.

Family is good. Parents ought to be honoured, especially in death. Yet Jesus conflicts with even these noble commitments.

The Samaritans reject Jesus outright. Can it be that sometimes our great loves can be a rejection of Jesus and his call to discipleship?

Three times a response or an invitation is set against the concrete demands of following Jesus. Those demands suggest some of our primary loyalties become secondary. If we follow him, we must be prepared for the conflict of good with good and be prepared to have some of our cherished loyalties rearranged.

But, as Richard Hays says, there seems to be this relentless tendency among Christians to reduce the claims of Jesus to the level of just plain, ordinary, common sense. The gospel of common sense is preached often. People in congregations are being told how to have happier marriages, how to find satisfaction in their work, how to live with a positive attitude and how to be healthy and wealthy. Some is good advice, but such advice isn't much different from any person whom you asked, 'How can I live a better life?'

- What if Jesus didn't come to us to enable us to live better lives?
- What if the way of Jesus isn't about common sense

In Luke, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus will eventually take up his cross and go down the narrow path that few want to tread. And yet.... on his way.... he invites people to walk with him.

He sends a couple of his disciples on ahead of him to a village of Samaritans, a place they don't want to go. **'But the people there did not welcome him.'** The messengers from Jesus face outright rejection from the Samaritans. Why did they reject Jesus?

Well, Luke says, he **'resolutely set out for Jerusalem.'** They don't reject Jesus because of differences with his interpretation of scripture or because they found him offensive. They reject welcoming him because of what he's walking to. And his wonderful, deeply spiritual disciples, after the Samaritans' rejection, urge Jesus to incinerate them. Nice!

He doesn't. Rather, he continues down the road where he is more graciously received by others.

And on the way, on this journey, three people come to Jesus:

1. One announces, **'I will follow you wherever you go.'**
2. Jesus invites another to follow him – he says yes, but.
3. The third say **'I will follow you, Lord,'** but!

Each makes a strong declaration of discipleship. One maybe hasn't realized that Jesus has 'no place to lay his head.' One of the would-be disciples has just suffered the loss of his father (it could also be a delaying

tactic). He must first give his dad a decent burial. Jesus responds with a brusque, **'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'** Not the most gracious of words to a grieving person. Likewise one says, **'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.'** Jesus rebukes him, implying that he is unfit for God's kingdom.

And though Luke doesn't say so, I wonder if there were fewer who continued with Jesus that day.

Today Jesus is rejected by a wide array of so called 'Samaritans' – atheists, agnostics and all the others. And yet, this doesn't seem to be the error that Luke is attacking in this story. It's not those hostile, outwardly antagonistic ones like the Samaritans; it's the believing, affirming ones who say, 'Yes! I'll follow you, Jesus,' who seem to be the objects of concern to Luke.

'Lord, I find you fascinating, and I have a keen interest in spirituality. . .' we say. Someone said this to me after Lawrence Redhead's funeral

'Are you prepared to risk parents, family, and home for me?' Jesus asks.

'Lord, your church is filled with nice people who seem a lot like me and my family. Put my name on this list.'

'Are you prepared to go with me amid people whom you despise and to try to be my church with people with whom you have little in common?' asks Jesus.

I did wonder a couple of weeks ago if we were being challenged in this regard. If you recall someone was in the middle of a psychiatric episode – this unsettled some of us; then a lady came in who'd obviously had more than a cup of coffee for breakfast. I wonder if we passed the Jesus test.

In today's gospel Jesus says some tough things to those who would be his followers. How many swaggered up to Jesus with, 'Lord, I'll follow you wherever you go!' only to fall away when Jesus specifically told them where he was going? How many among us this morning, having first 'put a hand on the plough,' have decided we're not really fit for this demanding road?

Too many sermons are based on the assumption, 'find out what people really want more than anything' (a contented marriage, a happy family, financial security, peace of mind, whatever) 'then convince them that they can utilize Jesus and his church to get what they so badly want.'

But what if Jesus comes among us not to be used for what we want but to use us for what he wants? What if Jesus wants more than 90 minutes a week from us, more than our hearts, more than our good intentions? What if he desires nothing less than our commitment to the coming of God's kingdom?

This was how it was for the woman who emerged from church one Sunday and said to the preacher, 'I've had a horrendous week; trouble at work, bad news in our family. So I came here this morning seeking some comfort and consolation.'

'I'm sorry for your trouble,' the preacher said. 'I hope my sermon was helpful.'

'Not particularly,' she snapped back. 'I came here hoping for some comfort and help only to be given an assignment!'

That's sometimes the way it is when you dare to walk with Jesus.

So did the woman who accosted the preacher at the front door at the end of a sermon on forgiveness.

'Do you mean to tell me that Jesus expects me to forgive my abusive husband who made my life hell until I got the courage to leave?'

Nervously and defensively, the preacher said, well... I only had so long for the sermon; I couldn't qualify everything I said. Abuse such as you've suffered is terrible. BUT on the discipleship road Jesus does tell us to forgive our enemies and who is a greater enemy for you right now than this husband who abused you.'

'Good, just checking,' she replied, and went out to walk her narrow way, glad to be enlisted in Jesus' assault on what had nearly destroyed her.

So like her, maybe you're here today just checking, you haven't refused to receive Jesus. You've received him, welcomed him, and you've hit the road as his follower. In some way or another you're like those who came to Jesus on his way and said, 'I will follow you, Lord.'

To be sure, you may not be the most faithful follower Jesus ever had. You may have reservations, questions, commitments, and loves that restrain you from complete, totally dedicated following. You've kept things from him. You haven't wholeheartedly committed to his way, but you're moving, you're still here. You got out of bed and came here today. As Jesus moves to his cross, you're moving towards your cross, as well. Who knows what he may demand of you along the way? Who can say what tough truth he will tell you?

Which makes it all the more remarkable that you're here, not just here listening but also walking the way of Christ. You know it's the way of the cross and yet, there you are, walking it anyway.

You know that he may tell you things that you don't want to hear, truth about yourself that you've been avoiding. Still, you're here. You can tell that this is a narrow, demanding way that he walks. Relatively few in our city are walking with him this morning. Many in our neighborhood are more like the Samaritans than the people who came up to Jesus along the way and said, 'I'll follow you, Lord.'

You're listening to Jesus, walking with him, trying to keep up with him. In spite of all the setbacks you've had in your attempts to be faithful to Jesus, you're here. You haven't looked back, haven't taken your hand off the plow. Here you are... walking the way Jesus walks.

God bless you!