

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

'Reassuringly expensive'

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Luke 9:51-62

Let's start with a quiz. This advertising slogan ran for 25 years, from 1982. At first it was a response to price rises due to high levels of duty. The heyday of the campaign was the 1990s, where this slogan appears in a series of award-winning, foreign-language adverts based on continental films, the first called 'Jacques de Florette', and it was followed by other successful ads such as 'The Good Doctor' and 'Last Orders'. In more recent years falling prices rendered the slogan redundant, and the product in question gained a more dubious reputation for contributing to domestic violence. The slogan was dropped in 2007. What was it?

'Reassuringly Expensive', advertising Stella Artois.

'Reassuringly Expensive' – it took a brave advertiser to come up with such a slogan. Usually advertising is about telling us how cheap or at least cost-effective products are. '2 for 1', 'never knowingly undersold', 'if you can find the same product cheaper, we'll refund the difference', 'every little helps' and so on. 'Reassuringly expensive' is counter-intuitive; it appeals to a deeper sense that what's really worthwhile is going to cost us – and it worked.

Well Jesus is reminding us in the Gospel Reading today that following him is 'reassuringly expensive'. Or maybe not even reassuring, but just expensive. If we ever thought that following Jesus can be a hobby, or that it could jostle for a place in our list of priorities, then Jesus brings us up short. So short that he even seems to be putting his would-be followers off. Let's have a look at these three people.

Jesus' first would-be follower is a volunteer. 'I will follow wherever you go.' It is a statement of complete commitment, without reserve. Probably it's made in a moment of enthusiasm. I imagine him as a young enthusiast; he's recognised that God is at work in Jesus and that being with Jesus is principled and meaningful and significant. But he's like the young man who makes a marriage proposal in the first flush of romance; he's not considered the cost. And doesn't repel him or easily accept him; he simply points out the reality: 'Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' Being a follower of Jesus means in a sense having 'no fixed abode', being a nomad, even a vagrant for God.

How can we make sense of this for ourselves – with our homes and incomes and commitments? This service of Eucharist and baptism has got a lot of us saying 'We will follow'. Parents and godparents – you will say this for yourselves and for Tom – we all say it when we say the creed. The words, 'I believe...' aren't just about giving intellectual assent to something; they are an act of trust and commitment. But the question is 'Are we "fair-weather" Christians – just for the moments when it's fashionable, socially acceptable, and doesn't make too many demands? Or will we stay following Christ, worshipping God, seeking the guidance of God's spirit even when it seems unsettling, bewildering, and challenging?'

The second person is challenged to follow. Jesus says 'Follow me.' But he said 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Now this seems quite shocking at face value, and I think we only get a tiny feeling of just how shocking it really is. One biblical scholar said that of all the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Bible,

this is the one he's most sure is genuine – because no one would have made up something so offensive. In Jesus' world giving your parents a dignified burial was just about the most important responsibility and act of respect you could pay them. It's not too different for us. Can you imagine us asking someone to do a job around church, and them saying 'Yes, absolutely; but this coming week it's my mum's funeral – so please can I start after that?' – and us saying 'leave the dead to themselves – your task is with God's kingdom.' You'd think I was crazy, deliberately trying to lose my congregation. And what Jesus says is rather more stupid than that – judged by worldly standards.

But I think the point is about priorities. The man wants to put following Jesus into a list of tasks to do. Let me get the other bits of life in place, then I'll turn my attention to following Jesus. And I think in a sense there are quite a lot of people in this category. They aspire to follow Christ or to do some particular piece of ministry. What might it be? Getting confirmed – a step of faith and commitment? Giving involved in some charitable work that demands time? Stepping up what we're contributing to God's work financially? Being more regular in worship or prayer or reading the bible? Finding time to find out about Christian faith, and consider it seriously? Whatever it is – but life is just too pressured at the moment – juggling home, mortgage, job, children. 'I'll think about it next year.' Sometimes we need to ask where is the authentic call of Christ for this moment. Can I order the other priorities in life in order to put this first?

The third person is similar – but different – because his request is about the living. 'First let me say farewell to those at my home.' Now the request is exactly the same as what Elisha asks in our first reading. Probably the whole conversation is influenced by that story – as we see from the talk about 'hand to the plough', just what Elisha was doing when Elijah called him.

There are lots of interpretations of this, but let me tell you how I see it. Elijah does what God asks, casting his cloak over Elisha to call him to succeed him as God's prophet. Elisha responds by saying 'let me say goodbye to my family.' In other words, he's saying 'yes'. And Elijah can't cope with the magnitude of what he's just asked of Elisha. 'Go back,' he says, 'What have I done to you?': cutting you off from family, asking this of you. Elisha's response is to show he means it. He 'burns his bridges' – or rather his oxen. He disposes of the tools of his old trade – he cuts his ties and commits himself to the work of God's prophet. In a sense he ploughs a new furrow – and is entirely committed to it.

The man who comes to Jesus, tries to be big and heroic, 'I'll follow you, but first let me say goodbye to those at home.' He's deliberately evoking the words of Elisha, trying to be bold and significant. And Jesus response is also to evoke Elisha, talking about the plough - 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is worthy of the kingdom...' In other words, 'You be careful about comparing yourself with Elisha. Are you really ready to throw in everything as he did? Recognise the cost.'

Today we celebrate baptism. Today Tom is getting a new family. This is a hard thing: in baptism parents lose their children a bit; they now have a new father/mother/parent in Go: they have different first commitment. Now this is not to say that family responsibilities are irrelevant – but they are part of my vocation as a Christian; I cannot make them a rival to it.

A friend of mine on facebook describes his religious views as 'currently on a free trial membership of the CofE'. I quite like that – you can try it out and see how it goes. God doesn't want quick rash commitments, he wants people who've considered it well. BUT in the end you have to take the leap of commitment in which we say following Jesus is the first and guiding thing in my life: 'I promise to seek his will in all

things; to give him the first place in my life and my heart come what may; to embrace the costliness of following Jesus.'

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Christian minister and theologian writing in Germany in the 1930s at the height of National Socialism. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, he talks precisely about this idea that following Jesus is costly. The church, he says, must stop offering 'cheap grace'. The gospel calls us to the way of costly grace:

'Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son... and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.'