

Sermon for 26th June 2022, Year C, Trinity 2, Proper 8

Preached at St Michael Smarden and All Saints Biddenden

Galatians 5:1,13-25; Luke 9:51-end

Today's gospel reading is full of contrasts – contrasts between Jesus and Elijah, between Jews and Samaritans, and between difficult wholehearted commitment and comfortable security. There are also contrasts between this gospel passage and the stories that surround it; for example, this story of a Samaritan village rejecting Jesus is followed almost immediately by Jesus' most famous parable – that of the Good Samaritan. How much more powerful does that story become when you realise that Jesus and his followers have literally just been rejected by Samaritans, perhaps only days before, to the point that the disciples were arguing for the destruction of the Samaritan village by fire?

While these passages in the bible are always valuable to be read even in isolation, we gain so much more understanding by reading around and getting to grips with the context, both the context of first century Judea, but also the context of how different parts of the bible often seem to argue with each other.

Let's think, for example, about the differences between Elijah and Jesus. Elijah was perhaps one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, fighting almost single-handedly for the worship of the God of Israel against the influx of the worship of Baal, which included human sacrifice. He famously called down fire from heaven on not one, nor two, but three occasions – twice to destroy two companies of fifty soldiers that had been sent to arrest him, and once to demonstrate the power of God by igniting an wooden altar that the priests of Baal had drenched in water.

When Elijah's work was done, he was called up to heaven in a fiery chariot, such was the honour in which God held him.

And only twenty verses ago in Luke's gospel, Jesus had met with Elijah and Moses on the mountaintop in the event we know as the Transfiguration.

In other words, Elijah is very much on the minds of the disciples when they ask Jesus if they should now call down fire on the Samaritan village that has rejected them. They want to emulate the great hero of their faith!

And since they are beginning to believe that Jesus is more powerful even than Elijah, shouldn't they expect that the Son of God would do even greater acts than Elijah himself?

But Jesus, in contrast, rebukes his disciples, and they simply move on to another village. In the NRSV translation that we use, we aren't given any detail about the nature of the rebuke, but I have read that some Aramaic and Greek Bible manuscripts have Jesus saying the following: "Don't you realise what spews from your hearts when you say that? The Son of Man did not come to destroy life, but to bring life to the earth!"

Jesus' mission is not righteous violence and punishment for unbelievers, but to convert people's hearts to compassion, forgiveness, and love for their neighbours, which, as Jesus announces in the very next chapter, also includes those awful Samaritans who have just rejected them.

The rebuke that Jesus gives his disciples is, I think, more subtle than it looks. He's not saying, 'look, Elijah was bloodthirsty and wrong, and I'm peaceful and good.' He's saying to them, 'your reasons for wanting to emulate Elijah are bogus and selfish; you want to feel powerful and righteous and mete out judgement!'

I really want to emphasise this. It's perfectly possible to feel like you're on God's side and doing God's holy work when in fact you're trying to use God for your own selfish and often cruel agenda. The disciples, like most Jews of their era, hated the Samaritans. What a thrilling joy, then, for them to experience the righteous justification of God punishing them with fire. But already they have

forgotten that Jesus earlier in this same chapter said that “whenever your ministry is rejected, you are to leave that town and shake the dust off your shoes as a testimony before them”.

And please bear in mind that shaking the dust off your shoes is not supposed to be a passive-aggressive way of showing your displeasure or cursing people who have rejected you. Far from it! To shake the dust off your feet meant that you were to move on with no anger or unforgiveness in your heart towards those who had rejected you. If you failed to shake the dust off your feet, you ran the risk of taking it on to the next place you visited or ministered in. The dust Jesus tells us to shake off are our own negative thoughts, our anger and resentment; we are to respond to rejection with immediate forgiveness, not anger or righteous fantasies of cruel vengeance.

It’s not easy, is it? We follow the God of love, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation, but always in our hearts is a secret delight when people we don’t like get their comeuppance. Jesus says ‘no, shake that dust off your feet!’ otherwise it will start to poison all your relationships.

Now, if we had been hoping that the second half of today’s gospel might offer us some respite from Jesus’ challenging teaching, we are sadly out of luck. Once again, we are given a passage that contrasts Jesus with Elijah, demonstrating that the commitment required to follow Jesus is greater even than the demands that Elijah placed on his own disciple Elisha.

We see in our Old Testament reading that when Elijah called Elisha to follow him, Elijah not only gave him time to say a proper farewell to his mother and father, but also sent him back to say a proper farewell to all his people as well. Jesus, on the other hand, when someone says, “let me first say farewell to those at my home”, replies rather harshly “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”. And what was Elisha doing when Elijah called him? Yes, his hand was on the plough.

This is clearly a challenge. Remember that Jesus' first disciples immediately left everything and followed him. Jesus clearly wants wholehearted followers, those who recognise something in him and his message that is worthwhile giving up everything else for, without hesitation or reservation.

When I was a novice nun, I always found it interesting that in the early centuries of the monastic movement, people who wanted to become a monk or nun had only to knock on the door of the monastery and answer the following question: "Whom do you seek?" If they replied by saying "I seek the Lord my God" they were allowed to come in and become part of the community. But they had to leave everything else behind. No possessions, no money, no family, nothing. Seek God alone. No distractions, no backup plans.

The man who says to Jesus "Lord, first let me go and bury my father" is probably hoping to gain an inheritance as insurance, just in case following Jesus doesn't go to plan. He wants security before seeing what following Jesus might do for him. But that's a dead end. If you'll only take the risk of following Jesus when your insurance policy or safety net is in place, then you'll never truly follow Jesus but only try to use him, and the kingdom of God will forever be a rumour you once heard and liked the sound of, but which you never experienced for yourself.

This is a hard teaching, I know, but I do believe there is a way out of the maze, and that is prayer. Our first calling is to obedient listening, to be mindful of God as our Father, to behold and to be held, continually hearing the voice that calls us 'beloved'. In this gazing on God, we are changed into God's likeness, and through this, the transformation of our lives and our vocations unfold – and suddenly we may discover, quite by surprise, that all the many things that prevented us from following Jesus are suddenly, miraculously, nowhere to be seen.