

## *Nest or Quest?*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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

Can I start by first thanking you Rebecca, on behalf of the whole ministry team, for opening up your pulpit, especially in what is only your first year. In case you did not know, Rebecca has invited each of the three lay ministers in the Parish (Sarah, Brian and me) along with our Deacon, Linda, to preach on a Sunday during the year — I am up first. I'll let that act speak for itself, other than maybe asking all of us to ponder what it says about the nature of true ministry. For my part, this is now a bit scary, because Rebecca's preaching has been so consistently good!

Anyway, let's turn to our readings. They are a particularly rich bunch and each provides food for many, many sermons. But perhaps one thing they all share is the idea of our lives as a spiritual journey. And the idea that on that journey there are stages of growing understanding about the nature of that path, and who is guiding us on it. All the readings have a strong sense of 'seriousness of purpose' and seem to be about people an awakening inner life that and moving to a new stage.

For example, our remarkable Old Testament story is not just a Hollywood piece about one prophet handing the reins to another with some amazing special effects — although that chariot of fire is something, isn't it? One way of hearing that story is as a series of icons of transformation. Being taken up into a whirlwind of fire is a wonderful picture of the consummation of journey towards God. The surrounding story has many more images. We hear how Elisha had to confirm three times, including to choruses of not entirely friendly priests, that he does indeed intend to follow the path of deep change despite being told not to — and to practice silence. And we hear Elisha almost impudently asking for a double share of Elijah's departing spirit — which, he is told, will be a very hard thing that will either happen or not. Powerful stuff. Each of those images is worth meditating on and working through.

And surely Psalm 77 would have to be one of the most poignant for people who have gotten the whole God bug, personal transformational thing. "I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints." In a line that we did not hear today it had a particularly haunting line about the inner journey : "I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit."

Even the epistle uses the language of resolution for change as St Paul tells the Galatians that they should "stand firm, and not submit to a yoke of slavery". He is describing the choices and the consequences of falling back to easy formula and legalism, or just giving into the flesh, versus following the harder, but infinitely more rewarding, path of trying to discern, and be shaped by, a life in the Holy Spirit.

But as usual, the archetypal example of all of this transformation journey stuff comes from today's gospel reading. We hear it in those slightly ominous words opening words, "*When the days drew near for him to be taken up* (please note the Elijah resonance there), he *set his face* to go to Jerusalem."

If you remember nothing else from today's sermon, please ponder those words "he set his face to go to Jerusalem".

Jesus does not just *decide* to go to Jerusalem, he *sets his face* towards it. This line heralds the beginning of phase 2 of Jesus' ministry. Until now Jesus in Luke's gospel has been the healer

and teacher. Today, we hear a quest being announced — a quest which includes both a destination and an attitude. The destination is going to be to enter into the whirlwind that is Calvary, and to come out the other side of death into resurrection as a fully transformed human. The attitude is one of resolve and necessary determination.

Needless to say, this path is not going to be easy. It never is. Remember that after Jesus' profound and mystical baptism even in him there was a backlash and he was tempted by 3 strong temptations. Temptation 1 was to have his physical needs and sensory desires magically provided for; temptation 2 was the temptation to power and control; temptation 3 was to ego buffering. These are primary temptations for all of us, and they never go away. As we walk the path of transformation with Jesus we start discover, perhaps in horror, just how deep they run.

In the lead up to today's Phase II reading, we get a similar sequence, although deepened. A lot happens in the remarkable, and long, Chapter 9 of Luke's gospel — it really is the big transition chapter, and worth reading as a whole with that thought in mind. In the middle of the chapter, we see Phase I of Jesus's ministry drawing to a close with another even more mysterious encounter — the journey up a mountain to Jesus' Transfiguration which is perhaps *the* iconic scene of transformation and trumps even that Elijah/Elisha one in today's OT. We almost see what theosis — the aim of our spiritual transformation — looks like; and with it a picture of our true human destiny.

Today's gospel story follows on from this with Jesus' new path and then his description of things that can go wrong. Again, this suggests that baptism followed by temptation is just the start. If we do move onto a deeper stage — to be given some experiences, or insights into the true nature things — then the consequence will probably be a call to further change, and to start to become more aware of other temptations that were always there, but maybe unnoticed. So, what can we expect? Well, the gospel reading usefully goes onto outline some of the consequences.

Let's quickly skip over the clearly wrong path of disciples John and James who, perhaps fired up with new intensity, want to firebomb the unworthy Samaritan village. It is a sad fact that a fundamentalist streak seems to be in the DNA of some religious types. It is even sadder that Jesus had to take the time to explain that this is not what intensity in the spirit is about ...

The interesting teaching comes with the three somewhat elusive examples of distractions. Given where they sit in the pattern of Luke's gospel, I like to call them temptations 4, 5 and 6. While these are more subtle than the primary temptations 1, 2, and 3, in my experience 4, 5 and 6 are every bit as real and strong. Let me quickly list them then look more closely.

Temptation 4 is the temptation to leave the path and find a nest or a hole. Temptation 5 is the temptation to look for displacement activities, including using our world duties (or perceived duties) as an excuse for not following the path. Temptation 6 is the siren call to look back to our past life.

I am mainly going to talk about Temptation 4 today. Jesus gently illustrates Temptation 4 via an image that is bigger than any explanation :

*Someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."*

So you want to follow Jesus with a newly awakened enthusiasm and a strong commitment to personal change? Well, Jesus gently says today, be aware that you have a natural instinct to want to go to a nest or down a hole. This will tempt you and you will keep on having to choose between your quest, or the nest.

What is a nest? It is a place we like to build ourselves, either in our lives or in our minds, where we can fly up to and feel safe. That we can feather. That we can look down on the going-ons of the world and hope that they won't affect us.

Deep down I know that I have a HUGE nesting instinct. Its voice sounds like this : 'Can't I just be comfortable and safe and choose to participate in life "out there" as I wish and then return to my nest?' 'Why can't I choose just to have as much of this religion or spirituality stuff as I want to augment my life?' 'Yes, all this transformation stuff is all well and good, but every now and then, I need to take a break and go to somewhere fluffy, and nice.'

Going deeper, Fr Laurence Freeman has coined the phrase "nest versus quest" to describe two basic dispositions towards life. In fact, the second thing I would like you to remember from this sermon if nothing else sticks is that question. Is your life more about "*nest or quest*"? Is our basic disposition towards life to build a nest : to become as comfortable, secure and pleasant as possible, and maximise our pleasant experiences and minimise our unpleasant ones, before we all inevitably die? ( — or maybe fall off our perches, to continue the metaphor.)

Or is our life essentially a quest? Am I the kind of person who ponders, and cares about, questions such as what is the purpose or meaning of existence? Do I deep down try to create an interesting and meaningful life. Do I really pursue a life of excellence and virtue? Do I care? Do I try to live as though my life matters?

And of course some people do go down holes. Places where we physically or mentally go underground and try to cut the world off. Warm, dark and safe away by myself away from the demands of the world, and prying eyes. Yep, I do that too.

Needless to say, by setting his face towards Jerusalem Jesus is saying that yes, your life will indeed become a quest as you follow him. In fact, he is also saying, I think, that once you have reached a certain level of awareness, in fact nesting ceases to work as an approach, at least not for very long. A "son of man", a grown up human, really does not have anywhere to lay his head.

Of course most of us have a mixture of both nest and quest. The interesting question is which one wins out. Without some kind of spiritual awakening, my suspicion is that the nesting instinct normally becomes stronger. And even if there is some kind of awakening in us, we can just become more aware of this in our lives and give into it. Of course nesting is what the materialistic world around us is constantly urging us to do. Which is maybe why this is a society that is starting to seem like a bunch of voracious mynah birds ... comfortable, safe, secure — even if perhaps shallow, selfish and isolated.

Isn't it interesting how Jesus' little remark to that person who wants to follow him has us wondering about the purpose of life and our response to it?

Temptations 5 and 6 deserve sermons in their own right. But in the interests of time I will only talk about them briefly. Temptation 5 as I mentioned was to engage in displacement activities. Remember Jesus said to a man "follow me" to which the man asks him to first let him bury his dead father. To which Jesus, shockingly (because burying the dead is important in Jewish tradition), tells him to let the dead bury their own. This is a subtle remark that could do with quite a bit of teasing out as to who the dead here really are. But I think the main point is that the subconscious is very good at presenting alternatives — many of which will look quite valid — for resisting change. In practice we all get attached to the details of our lives and immersed in the stories we spin to ourselves including all those little dramas to the point where it often becomes hard to see the big picture. And deep down those bits of us that do not

want to change will always create these alluring alternatives. Of those, the notion that we need to “do our duties” in the world is among the most compelling of all.

We see Temptation 6 in the man who wants to say goodbye to all those at home before he embarks on the path. At first blush Jesus’ response sounds pretty harsh, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”. But if we listen to his words through that lens of walking the transformational path, then Jesus is simply stating a fact of life. To the extent that we look back and hanker for our past, then we will simply find it difficult if not impossible to make much further progress down the path. Jesus’ image of the plough here gives us a key to all this. All these temptations are about distraction. A plough needs to go straight, to have *traction* with the ground. If we look elsewhere, maybe especially looking back, the plough is going to be pulled off course, to be *dis-tracted*. Needless to say our personal histories and our relationships and everything else, are important, and need to be worked through, but mainly because they affect the present. The past is just that, past. The future has not arrived yet, and so is not real. Life almost by definition is in the present moment and that is where our attention should be going.

Let me finish up with an apology if what I have been talking about today has sounded somewhat austere, abstruse or heavy duty. As you may have gathered by now, my feeling is that these readings are perhaps directed towards those whose spiritual lives have reached an inflection point, rather than to beginners on the path like me. Although they do all reinforce that Christianity really is a pathway of transformation to be engaged with, rather than a set of beliefs to ascribe to. And it is also worth noting the gentleness with which these new teachings are given. It is entirely possible to not notice them until we are ready, and there is no judgement involved. As usual they challenge us to the extent that we are ready to be challenged. And on that note, they do pose some squirm-making questions for me as well as planting a lot of seeds that hopefully will germinate later. It is important for me that I keep on being challenged, and reminded, particularly in such interesting ways.

Some of the questions include where do I think I am on my spiritual journey — in phase I or phase II? Am I a nester or a quester in my outlook on life? (The answer to that one, sadly, is a nester, which is why this sermon, like a lot of them, is in large part directed to me!). Is my life an existential choice worthy of someone who wants to live a fully as a “son of man”, guided by the Spirit, or am I a fearful little bird driven by instinct and conditioning? Do I let myself get constantly tricked by displacement activities? How much am I living in the past, future or with nesting fantasies? Together, Jesus’ sayings today also show why his number one piece of advice in almost all circumstances was to repent : we have to keep on deciding - making resolutions — setting our faces even — to keep turning ourselves back on to this path of change and gradually, with the help of Jesus who knows us and loves us better than we do ourselves, becoming clarified through his love. We at least have the comfort that Jesus has already carved out a path for us, and one that was always going to be more dramatic, more original and involve more suffering than anything we might do. And we have also seen how his choice to embrace freedom led to us being freed into the fullness of God and a deep transformation that we can for now, as St Paul might say, only see through a glass darkly.

And with that, can I wish all of us Godspeed on our quest!