

The Journey of Faith

St Philips' Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT

Third Sunday after Pentecost 2022

Revd Martin Johnson

1 Kings 19:15-16, Ps 16, Galatians 5:1, 13-25, Luke 9:51-62

During my time at the Army Recruit Training Centre, I became an expert in 'Worship Songs;' which might come as a surprise to some of you! Among the favourites for the Sunday morning Chapel was 'These are the days of Elijah' it was a catchy song with a great tune. I wondered if its popularity was because some of the recruits saw themselves as budding artillery soldiers and were keen to rain down fire on their enemies and I mused on whether I really wanted to be in the days of Elijah!

During the week we celebrated the birthday of John the Baptist—a reminder to us that it is six months until Christmas, a sobering thought! As I read the offices on that day, and dwelt upon the readings for this morning, the scene on the road to Caesarea Philippi where Jesus asked 'who do say that I am' came to mind. It is a passage which is literally and theologically at the heart of the gospel tradition. You will recall how the disciples answered him 'some say John the Baptist and others Elijah, and I wondered what Jesus thought of this response. As I pondered this, I wondered if our Christian tradition is unique in that its founder seems to be so out of step with the tradition that had nurtured him. Or perhaps, rather than out of step, proclaimed such a radical renewal of that tradition. I wondered if this perhaps the genius of Christianity: the reforming zeal of Jesus coupled with his continuity of the faith of those before him and what this meant for us today, we who live in such rapidly changing times.

Both John the Baptist and Elijah are classic prophets in the Hebrew tradition. The figure of Elijah looms large in the Jewish imagination, he and Moses representing the two great pillars of law and prophecy. You will recall that on the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus meets with them both. So we can understand something of the confusion today when the disciples want to emulate the great man. If you read the beginning of the Second Book of Kings, you will come across a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist. It is Elijah the Tishbite. He demonstrates his credentials as a prophet of God by bringing down fire from heaven not once but three times. The disciples ask Jesus if they can do the same to the wayward Samaritans, and he promptly ticks them off. Later someone asks Jesus if they can go home to bury their father before following him, a request made to the hairy man as we heard today. But unlike Elijah – although he rather begrudgingly gave permission—Jesus refuses the request. In this encounter, the words and actions of Jesus fly in the face of Jewish law and tradition. Jews have a sacred obligation to attend to the burial of one's father, and clearly to follow in the footsteps of Elijah is something to aspire to. We can almost sense the disappointment in the disciples.

There is a commonly held view that the stronger your faith the more you are blessed. I hold to the opposite view: If you haven't suffered despondency and disappointment in your life of faith, then you're not trying hard enough! And this is not just me being curmudgeonly. I find this time and time expressed in the Psalms: 'why do the ungodly flourish?' You've heard it too, I'm sure. Unfortunately, for too many folk, this is all too much to bear. We have this sense in today's readings, as first Jesus and then Paul re-envisage the faith and tradition of the Jewish people. It seems that whilst Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem, what is important is not just the goal but the journey. Perhaps that is what makes the faith so difficult, it is not altogether clear what we are striving for, particularly given that we live in goal-oriented world. Life goals are all the rage!

If you look once again at the Elijah story: at one point he seems hell bent on dissuading Elisha from following him. But Elisha insists, he understands the importance of journey and is rewarded with a double share of Elijah's spirit. Jesus tells his followers that he has no time to settle down, foxes have holes and the birds of the air nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. It is all about the journey and this is important for us in our lives of faith. And sometimes this is difficult. The goal seems too vague, we look around us and see fewer and fewer fellow travellers. It is easy to become despondent and disappointed. But we must keep journeying on. Jesus calls on us not to look back, but to push on.

This is given momentum by Paul today as he writes to the Galatians in what is something of a purple passage. It is Paul's thesis writ large. For Paul we are now free. Free from the shackles of the Mosaic Law which is static and external to us. Free from the constant concern of what we have done or failed to do, striving for something that is largely unattainable or looking back with regret, something which enslaves us. For Paul, we are now living in the Spirit. This is not something static that we struggle to grasp and live by, something almost academic. No, the spirit is something experiential, a lived experience something that inherently fluid, something that guides us on our journeying. As someone said recently in a sermon, I think: Christian faith lived as a set of demands or worse, a set a scales, is something that happens outside of us, imposed on us. Christian faith as a way of journeying is an activity in which we participate.

Our life goal is quite simply to love. Jesus, I would suggest, knows that the fire that he brings is not one with which to do away with those with whom we disagree. 'I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!' he says elsewhere, in Luke's gospel. The fire that Jesus brings is the fire of the Pentecostal spirit that binds us together and gives us all the language of love. This is not a place, a target, a box ticked, something we can achieve if we simply put own mind to it. It is simply a way of living, a way of journeying. If we are truly on the move, there will be dead ends. At times we will believe that we might be lost, we might feel something of the despondency of Elijah and the disciples. There are those who like Elijah would prefer even to die, but to do is to stop on the journey of faith.

We must always set before us, if I can paraphrase the psalm, the Christ who has been in all those places and journeys so close to us that sometimes we barely recognise him. The journey of faith is one in which are eyes and hearts are opened, albeit sometimes slowly. The goal, if there is one in this life, is to see and to see fully is to see God's love in action and join in. Amen.