

Trinity 2 Sermon by Andrew 30 June 2019 Stay with him

1 Kings 19: 15-16, 19-end; Galatians 5: 1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-end

I find our first reading from 1 Kings just fascinating. Elisha, having inherited the mantle of Elijah, slaughters all the oxen he's just been following, and roasts the lot of them. Twenty-four oxen – that's one heck of a barbecue! Not only that but he adds the wooden yokes off the oxen's backs to the fire. And what he's saying is: I've burned my boats, I've burned my bridges. The oxen and their yokes, the tools of his trade, they all represent his old life, and now it's over. There's no turning back.

Elijah, unlike Jesus, allows his new disciple to go home to his family to say goodbye. Elijah knows he's at the end of his ministry – he's been through hell and back, he's angered Queen Jezebel (a woman you did not want to get on the wrong side of – think a mix of Lucrezia Borgia and Alexis Carrington) he's been on the run and he's seen all that drama of his contest with the prophets of Baal, where he called down fire on a sacrifice to show just who is the true God (it was killing the Queen's prophets that got him into all that trouble to start with) and then the scene on the mountain with earthquakes and thunder and lightning, then God in the still, small voice, and so much more – so for Elijah there's a sense that his work is done and he can allow his new disciple a moment to say farewell to his family.

For Jesus on the other hand there's a sense of impending crisis. He's set his face towards Jerusalem. So there's no time for anyone who wants to be a disciple to turn back. No rushing home to see your Mum or check that you've turned the gas off. Neither is this a time for falling out with people or taking offence. Because he's on the way to Jerusalem the Samaritans won't receive him (which seems a bit ungrateful given how warmly Jesus speaks about Samaritans and relates to them – think of the Good Samaritan or the Samaritan woman at the well). So the disciples are all for trying out their prophetic skills and doing an Elijah. Come on, Lord – Let us bring down fire on their heads. It's only what they deserve. But Jesus is having none of it. He's absolutely single minded, and in this moment, it seems to me, he's terribly alone. He knows what he has to do, but those disciples still don't really get it.

So what you get from these two readings is a sense of just how costly it is to be a disciple. The German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred by the Nazis, wrote a book called "The Cost of Discipleship" and he ended up living out that cost completely. His discipleship came with the ultimate cost. Elisha burns the tools of his trade to say there will be no turning back, I'm on a new path now. Jesus leaves his disciples in absolutely no doubt that following him will involve a laying down of your life and a taking up of your Cross – whatever that turns out to be for you – in order to find life in a completely new way that you can hardly imagine.

And Paul to the Galatians takes this further. The call of discipleship is a call to freedom. For freedom Christ has set us free. The background to that was some Jewish Christians

going around insisting that people had to keep aspects of the old Law, like food laws and circumcision, but Paul says No, that's the old dispensation. Move on to what God has for you now. And this isn't freedom as complete license – just do what you like. This is freedom as an intense, expectant form of discipleship. Doing what a disciple does, which is sticking close to the Master. Rowan Williams says the key quality of a disciple is staying with Jesus. You remember two of John's disciples ask Jesus: "Master where are you staying?" He replies: "Come and see", and they "stayed with him". And words like staying and abiding are the key to this "sticking close" kind of discipleship to which we're all called.

Rowan Williams says there's no such thing as an intermittent, on/off discipleship. The key things is that you stay, you stay put with him. It means seeking his presence intentionally in all sorts of moments throughout your day, turning to him, waiting for him to speak to us, expecting that in any seemingly ordinary day he's going to show us something new.

And he has a lovely image for this. He says prayer is like birdwatching: "I've always loved that image of prayer as bird-watching. You sit very still because something is liable to burst into view, and sometimes of course it means a long day sitting in the rain with nothing very much happening. I suspect that for most of us a lot of our experience of prayer is precisely that. But the odd occasions when you do see what T.S. Eliot called "the kingfisher's wing" flashing "light to light" make it all worthwhile. And I think that living in this sort of expectancy – living in awareness, your eyes sufficiently open and your mind both relaxed and attentive enough to see that when it happens is basic to discipleship."

The disciple stays close to Jesus, so we don't miss the signs of his action in our lives or the ways he's reaching out to us and calling to us to follow him, or the ways in which he tries to lead and guide us. If I'm really honest and I ask myself whether I've intentionally tried to do that, often I'd have to admit I probably haven't and maybe that's why I can get a bit lost some times – whether it's just inside my own head with my worries or problems I'm trying to solve, or in trying to make decisions where maybe I haven't looked for his guidance. I haven't stayed with him, stuck to him, I haven't listened.

And this is where the rigour is, this is the discipline in discipleship, not turning back, not being distracted by the world or all my own concerns. So here's discipleship homework for all of us for this week, what does it mean, for you to stay close to Jesus, what does that mean for you? And what kind of a difference might it make if we did? Think of prayer as sticking close, as wasting time with God, as bird-watching. I've never seen a kingfisher, but I'd love to and maybe one day we all will. Jesus says: "Come and see where I live; stay with me."