

HEARERS OF THE WORD

1 Kings 19:16,19-21; Psalm 16 (15); Galatians 5:1, 13-18; Luke 9:51-62

No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God

Luke 9:51 When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52 And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53 but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 54 When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" 55 But he turned and rebuked them. 56 Then they went on to another village.

Luke 9:57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 58 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."

59 To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." 60 But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

61 Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." 62 Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

With this passage, we have reached a key moment in the narrative of Luke's Gospel. In all the Gospels, of course, Jesus makes a final journey to Jerusalem. However, in Luke it is underlined in a strong way and the journey to the Holy City becomes a major theme, just as the journey out from the Holy City will likewise be a theme in the Acts of the Apostles. Thus the gospel divides the ministry into 5:1-9:50 and 9:51-24:53.

The series of scenes in today's excerpt

underlines the focus on the journey and the determination of Jesus. The first part of the journey narrative, 9:51-13:21, located in Galilee, deals with the expansion and training of disciples.

KIND OF WRITING

This is part of the drama of Luke's telling, with its focus on Jerusalem, the place of salvation, and a consequent delineation of what discipleship means in light of the destiny of the Messiah. The first part of the journey to Jerusalem, 9:51-13:21, has itself an introductory section from 9:51-10:37, framed by the contrasting mention of Samaritans.

Writing always very consciously and carefully, Luke invites us to read together the framing stories, that is, 9:51-62 and 10:1-37 (themes: sending, commission, reception and reaction, followed by Jesus' teaching on the reactions and outcomes).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) The Holy City as a place of salvation: Blessed be the Lord from Zion, he who resides in Jerusalem. Praise the Lord! (Psalms 135:21) If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I

Thought for the day

In our day, it seems to be hard for people to make and sustain life-long commitments. We think we can always press undo and we like our freedom. But there are different freedoms. Specifically, there is freedom of choice and freedom of choosing. Freedom of choice contemplates the options; freedom of choosing concretises and makes real some specific option. There is joy in freedom of choice; there is greater joy in freedom of having chosen and having made a decision. There is no contradiction between freedom and commitment: "for freedom, Christ has set us free" as St Paul says.

Prayer

We need your guidance, Lord, to discern our path in life. We need your support to sustain us on the way. We need your joy to keep us joyful. Amen.

do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Psalms 137:5-6)

(ii) Fire from heaven echoes themes from Elijah, always important in Luke's presentation: *Then the king sent to Elijah a captain of fifty with his fifty men. He went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a hill, and said to him, "O man of God, the king says, 'Come down.'" But Elijah answered the captain of fifty, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty." Then fire came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.* (2Kings 1:9-10 cf. 2 Kings 1:11-12)



(iii) The duty to bury the dead is sacred in all cultures and beyond dispute: My father made me swear an oath; he said, 'I am about to die. In the tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.' Now therefore let me go up, so that I may bury my father; then I will return." Pharaoh answered, "Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear to do." (Genesis 50:5-6)

(iv) Son of Man = Jesus' own self-designation: I was watching in the night visions, "And with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man was approaching. He went up to the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him." (Daniel 7:13 NET translation.)

(v) Looking back: But Lot's wife looked back longingly and was turned into a pillar of salt. (Genesis 19:26)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Most of this passage is pure Luke, with only a little shared with Matthew: A scribe then approached and said, "Teacher, 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." Another of his disciples said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:19-22)

Follow me

After this Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." (Luke 5:27)

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." (Luke 18:22)

ST PAUL

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:12-15)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 51 A solemn start, echoing the

language of the Greek Old Testament; "taken up" is also used of Elijah and the fiery chariot and in this context is a reference to the ascension of Jesus, twice recounted, at the end of this Gospel and again at the start of Acts.

Verse 52 Preparatory messengers resume the role of John the Baptist and resemble the preparations for the Passover. Samaritans are important in Luke, being portrayed sympathetically.

Verse 53 Somehow, they intuit his purpose and set aside the everyday duty of hospitality. More important "everyday" duties will be set aside shortly.

Verses 54-56 This shows that the disciples have not grasped the kind of Messiah Jesus will be. Elijah does call down fire but Jesus is not that kind of prophet. Luke intends a contrast here between the mission of Jesus and the Church and the mission of the Baptist (see 3:9, 16-17). There will be fire—not the fire of destruction but rather the transforming fire of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1-2).

Verse 57 Luke, as always, has a double focus: the ministry of Jesus and the time of the Church. The focus here is on people drawn to the Christian proclamation and their various levels of preparedness. There are no examples in the Synoptic Gospels of someone coming on his own initiative and "successfully" becoming a disciple. The problem lies in the "wherever you go".

Verse 58 The homelessness of Jesus is part of his end time (eschatological) world view. A condition of discipleship is disengagement from an earthly home.

Verse 59 The standard calling by Jesus. It is not clear if the person's father is actually dead. More likely, he is asking for a postponement of discipleship, until he is free from family duties, a not unreasonable request. The son's duty to bury his father is most sacred in all cultures.

Verse 60 The response is prophetic and enigmatic. Here, "dead" means no longer just a physical reality but an existential one. A condition of discipleship is disengagement from future responsibilities.

Verse 61 This person makes a more modest request, apparently having heard Jesus' call but the uncompromising response is the same. Being in the Christian movement means joining another, much more important family (the so-called "fictive kinship" of early Chris-

tianity).

Verse 62 The interior attitude is that of single-minded commitment and focus: nothing else will "do" in the project of the Kingdom of God. The metaphor is sharp: a ploughman who looks back will make a crooked furrow. A condition of discipleship is disengagement from past relationships.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In the opening verse, Jesus is portrayed as having a new sense of clarity about his life that enables him to set out on the road 'resolutely'. Perhaps there have been such moments in your life, moments of insight and clarity about the road ahead. Recall such moments and what they were like for you.

2. As he walked the road, Jesus found that not everyone supported the journey he was making. Some of his friends were angry and wanted to hit back, but Jesus restrained them. What has helped you to cope with opposition you have met in your life and to continue your journey.

3. The response of Jesus to prospective followers seems harsh. He lets the first man know that discipleship is not a path to a comfortable nest. It is a way in which we never know what is going to be asked of us next. The disciple must be ready to move on. Where have you found good news in being open to change confident in the presence of Jesus with you?

4. Jesus also demands commitment. Being human it is easy for us to start thinking about times when our commitment was less than perfect. But can you also recall the times when you realised the truth of this story – that commitment brings its own fruits and blessings. What specific blessings can you bring to mind?

PRAYER

Sovereign God, ruler of our hearts, you call us to obedience and sustain us in freedom.

Keep us true to the way of your Son, that we may leave behind all that hinders us and, with eyes fixed on him, walk surely in the path of the kingdom.

Grant this through Christ, our deliverance and hope, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, holy and mighty God, for ever and ever. Amen.

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law

Gal 5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery.

Gal 5:13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity to indulge your flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment, namely, “You must love your neighbour as yourself.” 15 However, if you continually bite and devour one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another. 16 But I say, live by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh has desires that are opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit has desires that are opposed to the flesh, for these are in opposition to each other, so that you cannot do what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (NET)

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our penultimate reading from Galatians takes us to the heart of the letter by another route, that of the Spirit.

KIND OF WRITING

Letter opening	1:1-5
Introduction	1:6-10
Thesis	1:11-12
Proof 1	1:13-2:21
Proof 2	3:1-4:7
Proof 3	4:8-5:12
Proof 4	5:13-6:10
Conclusion	6:11-17
Postscript	6:18

As can be seen from the structure, the lectionary excerpt combines material from two distinct proofs.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The community reality is, alas, captured in v. 15. The intruders had assured them that various practises would help them in the moral struggle. Paul thinks very much otherwise.

RELATED PASSAGES

For the commandments, “Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet,” (and if there is any other commandment) are summed up in this, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Romans 13:9 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 This cry synthesises in clear language the convoluted arguments give in 3:1-4:31. Freedom: but *from what?* From death, sins, the powers and the (ritual) law. Precisely because we have been set free we are to stay free (a further example of the Pauline indicative and imperative). Just as Paul stood up to Peter, the Galatians have now to stand up to the intruders. The overtones are both military and apocalyptic.

“Yoke” is regularly used positively as in “the yoke of the Law,” that is, the sure guidance the Law provides. Paul takes on the language directly. In reality, the yoke of the ritual Law is a yoke of slavery, in several senses. To take it on is to undo the work of Christ!

Verse 13 Freedom is not only freedom *from* but freedom *for*. Paul certainly never meant it to mean freedom from the *moral* Law, also found in the Torah. “Opportunity” is lit. a base of operations, usually military or commercial. The “flesh” is Pauline shorthand not for the body but for humanity’s sinful impulses.

How to deal with misconduct and failure? Paul’s antidote is a surprise: they are to use their freedom *to become slaves of one another*. That is how to stand firm in freedom! The implied “enemy” here is pride, rivalry and autonomy, to be countered by loving mutual service. Cf. *the only thing that matters is faith working through love*. (Galatians 5:6 NET)

Verse 14 Paul has been attacking the Law throughout Galatians. As usual, Law denoted (i) the Torah, including all the narrative; (ii) the moral teaching, including the Ten Commandments; (iii) the ritual law. Clearly (i) and (ii) have not lost their value for Paul. Yet, here he is saying that the Law must be looked at again, through the lens of salvation in Christ, through his death and resurrection and through the gift of the Spirit. This interpretative turnaround had vast implications for Paul the Pharisee.

The term “summed up” is lit. in Greek to fulfil (the other lit. meaning is to fill up). *Plēroō* is *not* used in Jewish texts to mean the fulfilment of the Scripture; rather, it is a distinctively Christian usage. The link with Rom 13:9 may have lead the translators astray here. It could

be that the whole phrase would be better (and differently) rendered thus: “for the whole Law has been brought to fulfilment in one word/saying” which would then be a reminder to the Galatians of the teaching of Jesus. Cf. the important Gal 2:20.

Finally, it means that good conduct is possible, not because of the restraints of the Law, but on account of our being in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Verse 15 A savage situation, then, in Galatia, perhaps created or exacerbated by the intruders. The NET retains the force of the metaphors better than the JB.

Verse 16 A positive and not infrequent injunction. Notice the authoritative “But I say” in direct contrast with the teaching of the intruders. Live is lit. in Greek walk / *hālak*, reflecting the usual Hebrew way of referring to moral behaviour (*halāka*). Notice the future indicative after the present imperative. Paul is convinced all is possible *in the Spirit*.

Verse 17 Again, not the body as such but fallen humanity in opposition to God. Cf. both Romans 7 and Romans 8, for similar teaching in more expanded form. The very last phrase is difficult. The overall metaphor is that of war, which opens some possibilities and closes others. The battle has already started and you so *don’t* have to do just what you want to according the flesh because the Spirit is already fighting for you.

Verse 18 A final synthesis, echoing the metaphor of yoke at the start.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In your own journey of faith, has there been a sense of breaking away from a constricting tradition? How did you come to freedom?
2. When it comes to the moral struggle, the sense that we are on our one is truly self-defeating; we are not alone, because the Spirit helps us in our weakness.
3. Loving our neighbour as ourselves is attractive *and* a constant challenge. Right now, am I called to love someone whom it is truly difficult to love?

PRAYER

Liberating God, your gift and call to us all is that we free in your Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Help us to embrace your gift and hold on to it in the manner of our living. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Then Elisha set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant

1Kings 19:15 Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. 16 Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. 17 *Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill.* 18 *Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”*

1Kings 19:19 So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. 20 He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elijah said to him, “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” 21 He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

For the sake of clarity, the lectionary excerpt moves quickly from the start of v.15 to v.16. To avoid distracting details (!), vv.17 and 18 are omitted in the reading read in church—perfectly understandably in this case!

KIND OF WRITING

Chapter 19 has its own structure, somewhat as follows:

19:1-14: Elijah, in danger of being killed, makes the journey to Horeb, where the famous scene with cave and “the sound of sheer silence” takes place.

19:15-18: a new commission is given in the following steps:

Syria

19:15a: journey to Damascus
19:15b: anointing of Hazael

Israel

19:16a: anointing of Jehu
19:16b: anointing of Elishah

The purpose of YHWH

19:17: the threefold scourge
19:18: the faithful remnant.

Our story finds its meaning in that wider context showing Elijah reaching a low point in his career.

The second element—the call of Elisha—also has its own structure and meaning.

19:19: Context and empowerment.
19:20: Elisha is tested and challenged.
19:21: Elisha is consecrated.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

1 and 2 Kings formed a single work, perhaps divided into two to accommodate the large text in two scrolls. Very likely, the books of the Kings fitted into a much grander historical and theological narrative, known as the Deuteronomistic history, starting with Deuteronomy itself and then continuing in Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings.

Our short excerpt comes from a longer section, dealing with the separate kingdoms (1 Kings 13–2 Kings 17).

RELATED PASSAGES

Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. (2 Kings 2:8)

He [Elisha] picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. (2 Kings 2:13–14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 15 After the difficult experience of the threat of death, a new commission is given, involving Hazael—see 2 Kings 8:7-15.

Verse 16 Jehu stories will occupy 2Kings 9:1-13.

Verse 17 This rather fierce story has as its purpose the removal of all idolatry (and idolators) from Israel.

Verse 18 Yet, there is hope. A symbolic seven thousand constitute a faithful remnant. The next verses offer another account of the “call” of Elisha, perhaps reflecting a different tradition.

Verse 19 Elisha is regularly called the son of Shaphat: 1 Kings 19:16, 2 Kings 3:11 and 6:31. The number twelve of the oxen is certainly symbolic of the tribes, but also echoes ancient village practice of sharing resources. The mantle is a symbol of spiritual power: cf. 2 Kings 2:8, 13-14 (see above).

Verse 20 Elisha understands what is at stake and runs after Elijah. A very human request—not at all as time consuming as in the Gospel—is taken by Elijah to be a sign of wavering. In the rhetorical question, Elijah both challenges Elisha and leaves him free—an achievement.

Verse 21 Again, Elisha understands and his response—implied in the destruction of the means of livelihood—is absolute and unconditional. Hesitations, misgivings and niggling regrets have no place when God calls. This is the very theme taken up by the Gospel.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Go back to your own sense of calling as a Christians and perhaps as someone with a role in the believing community. The tug of family and mundane desires comes back again and again: how to you deal with it?

2. Elisha makes a complete break with what went before. Has that ever been your experience? What was it like? Was it part of discipleship for you?

3. For people involved in ministry, juggling family demands and pastoral responsibilities can be very tricky. How do you manage and what “wisdom” have you learned on the way?

PRAYER

God, you love us so much that your call to us costs “not less than everything” all that I am and have.

As we face such costly discipleship, let us be encouraged by the example of Jesus himself, who made himself poor that we might become rich.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

1 Kings 19:16,19-21; Psalm 16 (15); Galatians 5:1, 13-18; Luke 9:51-62

READINGS 1 AND 3

The testing of Elisha anticipates the much more severe demands of Gospel discipleship.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 16 (15) is a prayer of those who have put their trust absolutely in God, with no reliance on material and family security. As such, it forms a strong, highly appropriate response to the call of Elisha.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

1 Kings 19:16,19-21

Elijah is the original “iconic” prophet of the Old Testament, even if the stories about him are more folklore than fact. Today, the demanding call of Elisha, his follower and eventual successor, anticipates Jesus’ demanding call in the Gospel.

Second reading

Galatians 5:1,13-18

Tensions and divisions are normal in any group and also in the Christian community. The disciples in Galatia were no different: listen how Paul puts before them the heart of the Gospel. Spirit-guided discipleship is the only way.

Gospel

Luke 9:51-62

The single-mindedness of Jesus is robustly presented here. To underline it even more, two stark stories of startling contrast are added.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 27 June

Amos 2:6-10, 13-16

Economic prosperity was built on the back of the poor. The prophet does not hesitate to name it as it is. God is a liberator God who wants justice and freedom for his people.

Matthew 8:18-22

The conditions of discipleship are daunting and, yet, the stories are unfinished and open-ended...

ished and open-ended...

Tuesday 28 June

St Irenaeus, bishop and martyr

Amos 3:1-8, 4:11-12

Severely, Amos reminds us that everything has its cause and purpose.

Matthew 8:23-27

The storm and the boat symbolise the experience of the church. The prayer of the disciples could easily be ours today.

Wednesday 29 June

Sts Peter and Paul, apostles

Acts 12:1-11

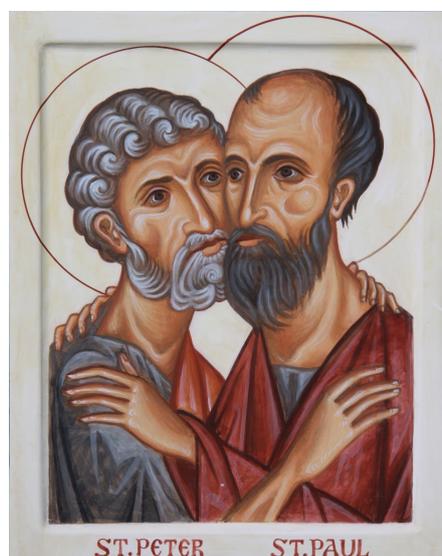
This symbolic tale reminds us that whatever the appearances, God protects his followers.

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18

Not really by Paul, this is a good reflection back on life as the apostle. He is shown as an old man, full of faith.

Matthew 16:13-16

Peter did attain a special role in the early Church, initially at Antioch in Syria. This present story is unique to Matthew and often thought to be a post-Easter commissioning account.



ST. PETER ST. PAUL

Thursday 30 June

First martyrs of the holy Roman Church

Amos 7:10-17

Amos disturbed the powers that be and in response they tried to silence the prophet. The higher clergy collaborate with the king to get at him, but Amos never falters. The silencing of prophets might perhaps have a special resonance for us at this time.

Matthew 9:1-8

The question is a good one: it is *apparently* much easier to say your sins are forgiven because the effects are unseen!

Friday 1 July

St Oliver Plunkett, bishop and martyr

Amos 8:4-6, 9-12

Here is a classic prophetic cry. Amos reminds the people that economic prosperity is a passing illusion and won't last. Rank injustice, a fruit of that false flourishing, will come to the attention of God. Above all, God's wants justice for all the people.

Matthew 9:9-13

This story is well remembered and with good reason. After the negative reaction of the Pharisees (who seemingly don't dare to confront Jesus himself), the Lord speaks three sentences, each worth a meditation in itself.

Friday 2 July

Amos 9:11-15

Prophets can seem predominantly negative and certainly Amos had negative things to say. But even these are expressions of God's faithfulness. In today passage, it is that very faithfulness of God which is the focus: in spite of everything, God will restore his people.

Matthew 9:14-17

The real focus of this little dispute is the sheer novelty of the proclamation of Jesus, a novelty marked by a break in religious practice. Apart from the forty days in the desert, it seems Jesus did not fast and this scandalised some. But old practices were not adequate to celebrate the radically new teaching of Jesus.