

# Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C (Proper 8)

## THE TEXT: LUKE 9:51-62

Footy season has been back in full swing now for a while. There's been enough games to get a sense of whether or not the high priced recruits were worth the money, or who should be dropped and maybe culled from the playing list at the end of the year. Mike Brady's famous song *Up there Cazaly* captures the fickle nature of supporters so well: "you either love or hate it, depending on the score."

Champion players who are lauded and decorated with all manner of awards are cheered when they're playing well but jeered when they're having a bad game. Champion players, after years of sacrifice on the training track, source of income for the club through promoting membership and marketing, and in some cases contributors to a premiership, are then mercilessly discarded from the playing list once they've hit the age of 30ish.

But this doesn't just happen in footy. Celebrities who are idolised are just as quickly dumped depending upon what the current social fad or trend is. Some years ago, arguably the highest profile golfer in the contemporary game, Tiger Woods, went from hero to zero after it came to light that he had cheated on his wife and had several affairs.

However the hypocrisy of that reporting was simply gobsmacking. The same media who desperately desires, promotes and rejoices in all manner of sexual promiscuity and unrestrained pleasure all of a sudden became a pillar of morality, and self-righteously savaged him over a sustained period for the sake of ratings.

And then there is the world of politics -leaders from both major parties over recent campaigns have risen up against party leaders, only to shortly after themselves be wearing a knife in the back, depending on how loudly popularity polls and surveys speak.

We would like to think that human faithfulness would be a natural response in all of these situations, but the reality is the natural human response is instead fickleness - and today's text shows that it is one that even shows itself in matters of faith.

As Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, a man approaches Jesus and declares: "I will follow you where ever you go." This man is a believer; he trusts in Jesus, he commits to following him. However, his confession of faith is reminiscent of the Apostle Peter who trumpeted that he would never fall away from the Lord - but who would later deny him three times.

This man's confession is bold, but premature. Jesus is, after all, going to Jerusalem - to be handed over to the chief priests and to Pilate, to be sentenced to death. To die a brutal and agonising death through crucifixion on a cross. Is this really what this man wanted and meant when he says he will follow Jesus wherever he will go?

With his reply: "The foxes have dens and the birds of the skies have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay the head" Jesus uses his own lack of a permanent home

as an illustration of the path his followers must walk - the path of humility and self-emptying, of dying to the self; choosing the life with eternal purposes instead of the temporal; choosing heavenly treasures instead of earthly wealth. We don't know if this person ended up following Jesus.

Then Jesus calls another man to follow him. This man is already a disciple - we know this because Jesus wants him to proclaim the Kingdom of God, and he doesn't ask just anyone who hasn't already been sufficiently instructed in the faith. But then we see the fickleness of the human heart again. This person makes excuses: "Lord, first allow me to go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him: "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God."

Jesus' words here seem harsh, but He is not forbidding the disciples to attend funerals - particularly of parents. But if this man's father had already died, the man would already be making funeral arrangements and not having this conversation. So it seems that he wanted to wait until after his father did die, before he followed Jesus, which might have yet been years away. That sounds like so many people today who put off following Jesus until some other day; usually in old age. But how do we know precisely when our last day will be? So this man in the text has divided loyalties. Jesus in effect tells him that the spiritually dead should bury the physically dead, and that the spiritually alive should be proclaiming the kingdom of God. What would you have done?

Still another says: "I will follow You, Lord, but first let me farewell my household." Here, again, we see the fickle human heart with its divided loyalties. And you might be asking "How can Jesus be so harsh and force the guy's hand into choosing between two things. But when this man gets back among his people, tells them of his intention to follow Jesus, and starts to say goodbye, will he be able to resist their pleading to stay with them and to give up Jesus? That's why Jesus replies: "No one who puts their hand to the plough and looks to the things behind is useful in the Kingdom of God." The phrase 'looks the things behind' is really in the sense of continually looking behind, longing, regretting for a former life before knowing Jesus.

Jesus calls us to follow Him. There is to be no divided loyalties. And following Jesus is costly. It all sounds like loss and slavery, doesn't it? In a way it is. But ironically, it's actually freedom. True freedom. Because if we're not following Christ, we ultimately following ourselves. And following ourselves is a greater cost to us than following Christ. Because when we follow ourselves, our fickle hearts are not a reliable guide. We wander from Jesus and His Word and become lost, ultimately a slave to ourselves - to what our own reason makes of God's Word and to our deficient systems and definitions of morality.

That's just what Paul talks about in our Galatians reading today: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature."

The options that Jesus gives to the men in our Gospel reading today are only two—follow Me or self. We don't know what they did. What about you?

In 1519, Hernando Cortez led the Spanish conquest of Mexico. When Cortez disembarked his men off of the east coast of Mexico, he set fire to the ships that had brought them there. His men, watching their means of return to their homeland going up

in flames, consequently knew that they were committing everything, even their lives to the cause of conquering a new world for Spain. There was no putting of the hand to the plough and looking back as it were. So also with you and me. When Christ says "Follow Me", we are also called to burn our ships in the harbour—that we would be free from all worldly loves and loyalties that might come between us and our Christ.

Jesus' call to the men in our text to follow Him is His same call to each one of us. What are the loyalties that distract your attention from your Lord? Do you call Jesus 'Lord' yet still indulge the fickle heart? Does His Word have authority over your reason, even when that Word stands for the opposite of being 'progressive' as society defines being progressive. In what ways will you follow Jesus in proclaiming the Kingdom in this place and community? How can we - and you - better do that? What are some of the opportunities that you see?

Jesus calls us to Jerusalem, to the Cross, every day. To daily baptismal living, of dying to the self and to what the world cherishes. Of crucifying the sinful self through daily repentance, and following Him in daily rising to the newness and fullness and freedom of the resurrection life that He won for you through His own death and resurrection.

He calls you to proclaim that same message to a world that desperately needs to hear it; which has no real life, purpose or meaning, lost in the insecurity and unpredictable nature of fickleness, where people try to measure up to appearances, popularity and a purpose for life based on the swirling winds of changing social fads. Is this not a greater cost than that of following Christ?

Following Jesus has a cost. But Jesus paid the cost himself, so as to reconcile us to the life of God and draw us to follow him, our leader. Our text says that Jesus resolutely set his face to Jerusalem. Jesus wasn't a victim of circumstance. It was God's will that he go to Jerusalem, go to the Cross, to pay the cost for the sins of the world through his death, even for those who did not receive him and reject him, like the Samaritans whom the Jews hated so much.

He died for those who did not deserve his love and grace; for those who did not measure up, for those whose love for God flickers and smoulders.

Then, triumphing over the grave, which we rejoice in, in this splendid season of Easter, our risen Lord calls you to follow him in a daily journey in his word, and to come to worship to follow him as he leads you as the holy host and chief actor in the worship service, to forgive, bless and strengthen you, giving you all the blessings and favour of God.

There is no other way that leads to life except to follow Jesus. It is because of Jesus who went to the Cross, to bring forgiveness, life and salvation to the world that we see God is not fickle.

He is faithful and loyal, with mercies that never end but are new each morning, who loves us unconditionally, dependant not on how well we have performed or measured up, but dependant solely on the merit of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He treads the path before us.

We follow him who has already paid and bore upon himself the cost of discipleship; we follow him who goes before us and leads us through suffering and death to resurrection and life everlasting. Amen!