

ASH WEDNESDAY (Luke 9:51-62)

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is beginning his Exodus to Jerusalem. Today's story is the start of Luke's travel account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Oral story tellers often organized disparate material by incorporating it into a journey. The story of the journey gives cohesion to a variety of material. On his exodus to Jerusalem, Jesus will teach the disciples many things about the nature of true discipleship.

The second major section of Luke's Gospel, begins with "He set his face to go to Jerusalem." This section, covers almost ten chapters and concludes with the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Today, we embark on the beginning of this travel narrative, capturing the story of Jesus as he travels deliberately toward Jerusalem and the fate that awaits him there. Jesus had reached a point of change in his ministry. No longer would he minister simply in the country. The time had come when he felt he had to take his message to the centre of Jewish life – to the city of Jerusalem. And all along this travel narrative we have scenes where Jesus talks about the meaning of discipleship for those who would follow him.

As Jesus made his conscious decision to go to Jerusalem, a Samaritan village rejects him. When he began his public ministry, the same thing happened, only that time it was in his hometown of Nazareth. Now, he finds a similar rejection as he begins his walk to the cross. Jesus, rejected by the Jewish authorities because he associated with outcasts such as the Samaritans, is now rejected by the very outcasts for whom he jeopardized his respectability in the first place. How sadly ironic. And so Jesus accepted the rejection and moved on. And this is typical of his ministry. When he's rejected, he always accepts the rejection. He never tires to argue or persuade or cajole – but if people want him to leave, then he leaves. The ultimate rejection, of course, was the rejection leading to the cross.

But, not everyone rejected him. There were many people who were enthusiastic about Jesus – and wanted to follow him. Jesus didn't use any gimmicks to attract them. He spoke to the unchurched people mostly in simple stories. He didn't become trendy to appeal to the popular taste – and if anything – he tried to put off would-be followers.

After being rejected by the Samaritans, Jesus encounters the three would-be disciples, and we hear excuse after excuse. As we hear Jesus' response to each, it becomes really obvious that he never attended the School of Modern Church Growth that preaches:

“make everyone comfortable.” Modern gurus of church growth tell us: sing upbeat hymns that everyone can follow and that make you happy and joyous – never mind that it’s Lent; don’t start worship with confession; we wouldn’t want anyone squirming in the pews now would we? We just want to make everyone feel good. That’s how you build a church. And here is Jesus, facing three potential recruits, and what does he do? Instead of accepting their resumes, he challenges their discipleship.

Look at the first wanna-be disciple. “I will go wherever you go.” To which Jesus replies: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” In other words: “Have you counted the cost, good fella? If you follow me, the Kingdom of God is now your home. And the journey is more important than the destination. What we do as we walk alongside of one another will be more important than the destination. For all your enthusiasm, have you counted the cost?”

The second fellow receives even harsher treatment. If there ever was a good excuse to delay discipleship, this guy surely seems to have it. Burying the dead was a duty of great importance in Jewish tradition. The commandment to honour one’s father and mother was included in fulfilling this final act of respect and devotion. In Judaism, all other normal religious obligations could be set aside in order for a person to perform the pious duty of burying the dead.

But Jesus would have none of that. With one of his strongest calls to discipleship and harshest words in Scripture, we hear him say: “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.”

There is no nice way to explain this. Jesus’ call is one of absolutes. The preaching of the Kingdom of God takes precedence over any familial relationships and any obligations. There is no easy way around this calling.

The third disciple wanna-be experiences the same treatment in response to his excuse for delay: “Let me first say farewell to those at my home.” To which Jesus says: “No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.” “Leave the past behind.” He is saying, “Follow me means new life. You can’t plough a field with your eyes looking behind you. Leave the old for the new.”

Harsh words. But Jesus still didn’t indulge either in anger at their rejection of him, or in

arm-twisting to persuade them to join him. Neither did he offer them a more superficial level of commitment. He told people the score, then it was up to them whether or not they joined him.

Discipleship requires an uncompromising commitment. Jesus never said: "Follow me, but only when it's convenient." He didn't say: "Follow me, after you've taken care of your agenda." He didn't say: "Follow me, it will be a simple trip – only a cross awaits." He DID say: "Follow me!"

The walk behind the plough is arduous, the heat makes the sweat run down your face, and you keep running into boulders. The way is narrow, steep, filled with bandits, and hangers-on; it moves through many a wilderness, with long distances between oases, and no autobahns; it moves through "fast food strips" with numerous temptations to detour. The food will be scarce, the water will barely slake your thirst, and on many a night you will have no place to lay your head. A stable might have to do.

No detours or side roads, just straight ahead. No delays, indecisiveness, or looking back once begun. Even second thoughts are ruled out. Discipleship calls for a decisive break from the past. This is a call for faithfulness and responsibility within relationship. This is a call to stay the course, come what may. But, in this walk we are not alone; Christ promises to be with us and to lead us along the way.

Unfortunately, we don't find out what the three would-be, wanna-be, could-be disciples did in response to Jesus' challenging words. Did the first one decide that the cost of not having a place to lay his head was worth the effort to follow? Did the second leave the dead to bury the dead? Did the third leave without proper "good-byes" to his family? We don't know. The words of Jesus, the advice he gave to those who would follow him to a cross, hang in the air as if for all time, reaching our ears today with the same searing challenge.

Do we want to follow Jesus? It is a journey. The early Christians were known as and were called "people of the way." It's still true. It is a way; of living, of life, of grace, of hope, and of power. The call of Jesus is a call for loyalty above all else; to follow not when it's convenient; not when all our tasks and lists are checked off; not when we feel like it. But to follow him into the world where we now become his hands and feet for compassion; his voice for justice and mercy; his arms for reconciliation; his heart for the hurting, the

haunted, the hungry, the weak, the vulnerable.

Jesus' call to each of us is to use the gifts he gives us in service in his name in and for the world his father created. To do that is to be faithful and to follow. To do otherwise is to be a wanna-be who hasn't counted the cost of being a disciple.

What do we say to the call to follow Jesus? What will we say the next time the call goes forth from Christ's Church that hands are needed for a task? What will we say when we read that Christ's body in its corporate form needs willing hearts and minds to serve? What will we say when asked to use the blessings Christ has given us and to return that blessing in service? What will we say? Will it be life by excuses, which is no life at all? Or will it be service born of gratitude for all God has given us?

The Church is not a place for gimmicky attractions. It's the place to nourish those who have already made a commitment to follow Jesus. It's the place for some depth of theology and teaching – a place to enable worshippers to deepen their experience of God. The purposes of a deepening experience of God is to give his disciples the courage and the knowledge and the will to go out amongst the people and to enable them to experience Jesus where they are: on the hills and the lake; hanging about in the marketplace; mending their fishing nets; during supper; at parties; at work; and in their own homes.

This call of Jesus is still a challenge today. He needs willing disciples to carry on the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God and of witnessing through their lives. And what will you say when you hear that call? Will it be life as excuse or life as service? It's your call!

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 5, 2025

God, we are marked with ashes or water, symbols of a repentant heart, and contrite spirit. We want to be transformed, to be made new, to learn the freedom, of serving no master but you.

God, we pray for leaders of the Church. May they serve as examples to those who would come to believe in Christ for eternal life. May the Church place its hope in you, and not in human wisdom. Empower your church to be an ambassador of reconciliation in the world.

We pray for the leaders of the nations. May they show mercy and advocate for the rights of the people. May they seek the greater good rather than their own interests. Make this the acceptable time for peace. Guide leaders of all nations to put an end to war and violence.

We thank you for all you that created. Your Son rejoiced in your creation, praying in the wilderness and walking on the sea. May we appreciate the works of your hands. Restore creation to wholeness and strengthen our resolve to be good stewards of all that you have made.

We pray for peace and justice for the people in Ukraine and the middle east. We pray for the families who have been separated as they flee the savage attacks and destruction of their homeland. We pray for all hostages and prisoners of war, that they return to their homes.

We pray for the countries offering refuge to those who are fleeing, for Canadian World Relief, for the doctors, nurses, and medical aids helping the hurt and wounded. We pray for the children who are facing such horrors.

We pray for the sick, the anxious and the sorrowful. Make them hear of joy and gladness, that broken bodies and broken spirits may rejoice. Be merciful to those in need: the hungry, the afflicted, and the imprisoned that their joy be restored.

Look with mercy on our contrite hearts, wash from us the stain of iniquity, and create a new and right spirit in us, that we may declare your praise and offer an acceptable sacrifice in these Lenten days, through Christ Jesus, who bore our sins on the cross and taught us to pray:

Our Father ...