

Proper 8 (NRCL) 2022 - 3 after Pentecost

Today's reading from the Book of Kings needs to be put into context, otherwise the only reason it makes sense here is the request from Elisha to say goodbye to his family - that clearly chimes with the Gospel reading, and that is why, I suspect, we have it today. But I think this reading is more about Elijah than Elisha, and that is where context comes in.

Elijah is a frightened man, and not only is he frightened, he is depressed, very depressed. So, a quick canter through what has happened before. King Ahab of Israel has married the princess Jezebel of Sidonia, who has brought with her prophets and priests of Baal, a pagan religion, which Ahab embraces. Elijah has challenged the priests of Baal, triumphed over them, slaughtered many of them - and Queen Jezebel

demands his life. He flees to Mount Horeb, fed on his way by angels - but in spite of his triumph and the care of angels, his faith wavers. 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' asks God - twice. 'What are you doing here?' It is not the doing bit that God is interested in - it is the 'here'. Why are you here when you should be somewhere else? In his depression Elijah exaggerates his problem - 'The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, and I alone am left'. God's question is asked twice and both times he gets the same reply. 'Only I am left'. Elijah really does feel sorry for himself. And in response, God gives him a task to do - go, anoint Hazael, anoint Jehu, anoint Elisha. It is really 'stop feeling sorry for yourself and get on with the job I have given you to do'. We only hear, in today's reading, about the calling of Elisha, presumably chosen to reinforce Jesus' words about hands on ploughs, and families. But if we could concentrate not on Elisha and his unwillingness and then

sudden willingness to commit to the task, but on Elijah, the man who ran away and then realised he couldn't run away, that he wasn't alone, that there were others who were faithful, and that he had a job to do and that he had better get on with it, and that he needed to accept the help of others in that task - that can be quite humbling, having to accept that the job you have been given requires you to recruit - or take on board - other helpers; to acknowledge we are not omni-competent - and neither are we alone. From 'I alone am left', to having Elisha alongside, from being the heroic figure acting alone to being part of a team God is calling together - what a move!

Jesus never tried to do it all himself. His first act in ministry was to call others - follow me - he said, and they did. Not only the twelve, but many others, some of whom turned back when the going got too hard. Today

we hear about three men who thought they would like to follow - strange, isn't it, that we never hear about Jesus calling women, but clearly, and especially in Luke's Gospel, they are there. Anyway, these men want to follow, except something always gets in the way. The first one we meet is challenged by Jesus' homelessness. Is he prepared to accept that? We aren't told about his response, but we are challenged. Is your security more important than your faith? Probably not a question we need to answer, but in some places of the world it is a very important question. Think about Sikhs in Afghanistan, as their last formal place of worship has been trashed - do they stay firm in their faith, convert, or depart to another country? Think about Christians in China, who must constantly ask themselves this question - faith or security - and in many other countries too. Do I want to be secure, do I want my family to be secure,

or do I want to follow Jesus? Can you imagine having to make that choice?

And then there is the man who wants to follow Jesus, but feels he needs to go back and bury his father. This was a very important duty in Jewish society - but what does Jesus mean by 'let the dead bury the dead'? Perhaps he is talking about those who are spiritually dead, who are just going through the social rituals without finding any meaning in them. Is doing what is socially expected more important than doing what you believe to be what God is calling you to do? Questions we need to ask of ourselves.

And finally, there is the man who, like Elisha, wants to say goodbye - perhaps to explain or apologise.

Luke makes it very clear that following Jesus is not easy. The disciples argue on the road about who is the

greatest amongst them, much as Elijah moans 'I'm the only one left'. Personal ambition gets mixed up with the project management. Strangers get involved - seven thousand in Elijah's case, just three in today's Gospel reading. Elijah called down fire from heaven to destroy the priests of Baal - but when James and John suggest the same punishment for the village in Samaria which would not receive them, Jesus rebukes them. This is no triumphant march to Jerusalem, sweeping all resistance aside; it is a quiet journey of love and healing, the progress of the gospel of the kingdom - so full of grace and forgiveness that many find it shocking - so shocking that they want to destroy it and get rid of Jesus. He knows that that is how it will be.

Think of the parable of the sower - these three men are like the seed which was cast amongst weeds or fell on stony ground. They want the word within them to

germinate, but - always that but, - there is so much more pressing in upon them - fear, family, culture - faith crowded out by overwhelming problems or failure to flourish for lack of depth.

Jesus tells us 'I am the way', but he also tells us that if we are on this way we have to daily take up our cross. That's not an invitation to a party - at least, not in this life; it is a call to commitment, perseverance, and struggle. He never says it will be easy - but he does tell us it will be worthwhile.

Today's Gospel reading is hard work - nowhere to lay your head, abandonment of social norms, never looking back but only looking forward along the path he leads - and the one command we hear - 'Go and proclaim the kingdom of God'. At the end of the day, as we say, isn't that why we are here? To equip ourselves to go and proclaim the kingdom of God?