

## Readings for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

26<sup>th</sup> June 2022

### First Reading: 2 Kings 2:1-2,6-14

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, 'Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.' But Elisha said, 'As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So they went down to Bethel.

Then Elijah said to him, 'Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.' But Elisha said, 'As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 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.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.' Elisha said, 'Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.' He responded, 'You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.' As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

He 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.

### Second Reading: Galatians 5:1,13-25

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Gospel: St Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. 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?' But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, '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.' To another Jesus said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

**A Reflection for the Third Sunday after Pentecost**

Last weekend, the Celtman Extreme Triathlon took place. This event starts with a 3½ km swim in Loch Shildaig at dawn, in what are described as cold, jellyfish infested Atlantic waters. This is followed by a 200km cycle from Shildaig up through Gairloch to Braemore junction, down to Garve and back to Kinlochewe. It finishes with a 42km run across the Torridon mountains. The fastest competitors, men and women, complete the course in 10 to 12 hours. It probably won't surprise you to know that this is not something that appeals to me in the slightest. However, I can't help but admire the focus and commitment of the athletes competing at this level.

A call to focus and commitment is one way that today's Gospel passage can be interpreted.

There are places in the Gospels where what is described seems strange and Jesus' words can appear to be difficult to understand, perhaps even harsh and unfeeling. For me, this passage is a bit like this. The disciples' reaction to the refusal of a Samaritan village to receive Jesus seems unnecessarily violent – more what we might expect to happen in the Old Testament than the New. And then Jesus' responses to some would be disciples are not exactly encouraging, especially as their requests to bury a father or say goodbye to a family don't seem that unreasonable. Yet there is this underlying sense of urgency and of the need for total commitment. One commentator described this passage as a lesson in how not to be a disciple!

The first verse of today's reading is a pivot point in Luke's Gospel. Before this, Jesus has been portrayed as an itinerant preacher, in and around Galilee. Now we are told that Jesus 'set his face to go to Jerusalem', a phrase that is redolent with a sense of determination, of single-mindedness, and that he is fulfilling his destiny. Jerusalem is the place where he would face rejection, suffering and death. This new phase of Jesus' ministry starts with his rejection by a village of the Samaritans, just as he was rejected in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his Galilean ministry, and as he will be rejected in Jerusalem.

Luke's is the only Gospel to present Jesus as going through Samaria. Elsewhere, Luke generally presents a reasonably favourable view of the Samaritans – the parable of the Good Samaritan comes fairly soon after this. And in Acts,

before his Ascension Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach the Gospel in Samaria, a place where it was generally well-received. Nevertheless, there was a deep rivalry between the Jews and the Samaritans. There were various points of contention, the main one being the correct place to worship God, which was of course Jerusalem for the Jews but Mount Gerizim for the Samaritans. Samaritans were regarded as 'unclean' foreigners by the Jews, though not so much as Gentiles.

Due to this rivalry, Galilean Jews going to Jerusalem usually crossed the Jordan river and travelled along the other side to avoid passing through Samaria. But, for reasons we are not told, Jesus chose to go this way. When the disciples went ahead to make ready, the Samaritan village refused to receive him because, it says, 'his face was set towards Jerusalem'. In the light of the rivalry between the Samaritans and Jews, it is probable that they would have wanted nothing to do with any Jew headed to Jerusalem.

For their part, the disciples seem to have forgotten Jesus' teaching on an appropriate response. Earlier, when Jesus had sent the twelve out to minister, he had instructed them to take nothing, to rely on hospitality and, if they were not welcomed, simply to leave and shake the dust off their feet. Instead of this humble response to rejection, James and John want to call down fire from heaven to destroy the village ... and they were rebuked for it by Jesus. Retribution and destruction are not Jesus' way and not part of being a disciple!

We then come to the three encounters with would-be disciples along the road. It is not clear whether these were local Samaritans or part of the group travelling with Jesus.

The first wants to follow Jesus and is told effectively that this will be a path of hardship without any material comforts, therefore requiring total dependence on God. The second is commanded by Jesus to 'Follow me' without first going to bury his father - his response must be immediate. Similarly a third, who wishes to follow Jesus but first say farewell to his family is told that, if he does so, he is unfit for the Kingdom of God. Jesus has just set his face to go to Jerusalem, and all that will mean, and so these pronouncements can be interpreted as requiring a similar commitment from his disciples and others who would follow him. The implication is that these three did not accept the call, but the text doesn't say this; it doesn't tell us how they responded. What it does tell us is that to come seeking material security, or wishing to push the decision to commit further down the line, or making excuses, is not the way to be a disciple of Jesus.

Of course, following Jesus does require commitment. However, to take these statements literally as ways to behave, to suggest that our faith requires us to ignore our other responsibilities, is to miss the point and to fail to look at the Gospel message as a whole. There are plenty of other places in the Gospels where Jesus has compassion on those who want to follow him and where family obligations are fulfilled. We all have many and varied claims competing for our time and attention. Some are more important than others. This text invites us, indeed reminds us, of the need, to re-consider our priorities and commitments as we seek to follow Jesus and respond in a Christ-like way to those around us.

The other two readings set for today both remind us that to be disciples, to have that commitment, we need the help of the Holy Spirit. Today's reading doesn't give us quite the whole story of Elijah and Elisha's final journey together, but Elisha shows determination, commitment, to stay with Elijah to the very end despite Elijah's repeated attempts to get him to remain behind. And when it came to the end, the Spirit was the key ingredient in the transfer of

prophetic leadership as Elijah was taken up to heaven. Elijah recognised the Spirit's value as he told Elisha that, in his request for a double measure of his spirit, he had asked a difficult thing. Elisha recognised that the Spirit was essential to the prophetic ministry to which he was being called. Being named as Elijah's successor was not enough – he needed the Spirit of God.

And in his letter to the Galatians, Paul says 'Live by the Spirit'. He is clear that it is the Holy Spirit that enables us to lead lives faithful to Christ.

We may not be elite athletes, competing in Extreme Triathlons, but the imagery of races is used in several places in the New Testament. Hebrews urges us to run the race set before us with perseverance, and Paul, in the first letter to the Corinthians, tells us to run the race in such a way as we may win it. The commitment and focus to do so comes through the guiding of the Holy Spirit as we consider the sometimes competing demands on us and prioritise those to which God calls us.