

Readings for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

29th June 2025

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

'I have not failed. I have just found ten thousand ways that won't work.' These words are attributed to Thomas Edison, the prolific inventor, in his pursuit of the first commercially successful incandescent light bulb, although he didn't actually invent it as such. Eventually he was successful and his bulb revolutionised the world. His determination to find a solution is a testament to the power of perseverance.

Last week's readings spoke of God's love and care for us, especially in times of adversity, reminding us that we are never alone. Having assured us of that, this week's readings speak of the necessity of perseverance in our faith. One definition of perseverance is the pursuit of what is most important.

In our Old Testament reading, Elisha persevered in staying with Elijah, despite what appear to be Elijah's best attempts to leave Elisha behind, as he was preparing to be taken up into heaven. Elisha was Elijah's servant and successor as prophet in Israel, a role which was, as we heard last week, no easy option. Although King Ahab was now dead, his successors were no better, and Elisha recognised that he would need every bit of help he could get. This was reflected in his request, when Elijah asked what he might do for him, to be given a double share of Elijah's spirit. But this was not just handed over; Elijah told Elisha that he would receive it only if Elisha witnessed Elijah being taken. In other words, Elisha would need to persevere in his journey with Elijah and keep paying attention. Elisha did that, and received what was promised. And, if you read further in the second book of Kings, you will find accounts of some of the events of Elisha's prophetic ministry.

Our Gospel reading also starts with a reference to being taken up to heaven. We are told that as the days drew near for that to happen, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. Jesus knew his destiny and there is a determination in these words. From here on, Luke's Gospel will be about that journey and the dramatic events at the end of his life, when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. Jesus persevered with the mission he had come to earth to fulfil, and he wanted those who followed him to have that same sense of commitment, of perseverance. It was going to be tough: Jesus spoke

of foxes having holes and the birds of the air having nests, but the Son of Man having nowhere to lay his head; there would be suffering and rejection.

As he continues, Jesus words sound harsh. One person is told to let the dead bury their own dead, rather than bury his father. Another is told not to look back when he wishes to say farewell to his family. 'No-one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God', he is told.

I don't know much about ploughing but I did once see a ploughing contest in progress. The aim, of course, is to get a perfectly straight furrow and one can only achieve that by paying careful attention to what matters: looking forward and keeping the wheels straight. I imagine that's even more important with oxen – take your eye off them and they would probably wander off towards the nearest clump of juicy-looking grass.

This apparent demand by Jesus for single-minded perseverance in following him, to the exclusion of all else maybe sounds unrealistic to our ears. Who can actually do this? Who can possibly be fit for God's kingdom if we are called to ignore our responsibilities?

One thing to take note of is that those to whom Jesus was speaking here had been conditional in their response to him. Yes, they had said, I'll follow you, BUT first I must do this or that. What are the conditions we put on our faith, I wonder? Do we say 'Yes, we'll follow you, yes we'll commit to pray, yes we'll commit to give of our time and our money, but first...I need to finish the laundry, or complete that urgent piece of work, or see to the needs of the family...' I expect we've all been there.

If we look at this passage in isolation, we see a formidable response from Jesus to a conditional response from his would-be followers, and it does appear that Jesus is saying that they must choose between him and these other things. It seems to be either/or.

Are we only prepared to follow Jesus when everything else has been completed? As one commentator has pointed out, what if some of these people had said yes, I will follow AND I will bury my father or tell those at home. Just as we can't compartmentalise our lives, so we can't compartmentalise our faith as something separate from everything else. We can't say 'Yes' to following Jesus only when everything else is done – we would never start!

So, we need to see this passage in the wider context of the whole Gospel. Jesus calls us to follow him wholeheartedly, with perseverance, while we are also doing all of the ordinary things of life. Those responsibilities are part of following Jesus. It is both/and.

The perseverance we are called to is unlike that of Edison whose perseverance was sequential: he tried one thing after another until he found something that worked. Perseverance in faith is all-encompassing: it includes and guides everything we do. We are called to make following Jesus our priority and the way we approach everything else follows from that. As we know well from the Gospels, and as today's passage from Galatians reminds us, following Jesus means loving our neighbours as ourselves. Loving our neighbours as ourselves means we see things in a new way, we may go in new directions, we may find new companions on the way. No-one promised that it would all be plain sailing, certainly not Jesus, but as the passage from Galatians also reminds us, we are promised the Holy Spirit as our guide.