

The Second Sunday after Trinity, Year C, 2022: Proper 8: 1 Kings 19.15-16, 19-21, Psalm 16, Galatians 5.1,15-25, Luke 9.51-62

Imagine twelve super tractors plowing a large area all at once. If you are from the Prairies in Canada or from the fertile plains north of the Black Sea in Ukraine not so difficult. Now imagine twelve yoked pairs of strapping oxen ploughing a field in Israel, as we are invited to do today. One of the plowers is Elisha, whom Elijah will cover with his mantle thereby indicating that he Elisha is to be his successor.

We shall focus briefly on Elijah's initial call to Elisha to follow him. Elisha is willing to follow, but first he must tell his parents that he is off to plough furrows for the Lord God. Elisha's call builds a bridge to today's Gospel reading, in which someone who is called to follow Jesus expresses his wish first to say his farewell. Whether Elisha does or doesn't say goodbye to his parents is not settled by the text. Let's simply assume he does, but to ensure that his decision to follow Elijah is final he slaughters his pair of oxen using the equipment (worth a bob or two) as firewood. Having 'sacrificed the bulls' Elisha distributes the meat to the people to eat and then follows Elijah as his servant.

Elisha has burnt his bridges. There is no going back. Elisha has thrown in his lot in with Elijah the prophet, who is an instrument of God's will. It is through Elijah that a new religious and political order is being ushered in, of which Elisha will be prophet. This new order is not without parallel to the new ordering of our relationship with God as made possible in and through Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, empowered and inspired by the Holy Spirit working in God's Church.

Membership in, belonging to, this new order as revealed through God working in Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit comes about by a decision that is left to each one of us to make. What this means Paul spells out in his letter to the church in Galatia, a Roman province in Asia Minor, today Turkey. The language Paul uses is provocative. He speaks of being slaves to one another, today we are better served by using the language of being yoked to one another. We have freedom to choose Christ or not, but if we choose Christ there is to be no going back, no slipping and sliding. Through baptism we are yoked to Christ and being yoked to him, we are yoked to one another. Paul emphasises this in the Galatians reading, when he sees our lives under the Holy Spirit. In all things we are to be led by the Spirit, and not to be led by gratifying

the flesh. This is for most a constant and indeed a lifetime struggle, even though Jesus says elsewhere, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Mt 11.30) A paradox we do well to reflect on. As we are under the Spirit it is the Spirit who empowers and inspires us, gives us life, alongside God's word as recorded in Scripture and the dominical sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.

The section of the letter to the Galatians we are considering has two lists. As listed in the letter they are in opposition to each other. One is desirable and the other is undesirable. One is the fruit of the flesh and the other the fruit of the Spirit.

The first list reads, "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."

The second list reads, "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."

Sadly, you will find much of both in most communities, but hopefully the balance in Christian communities is always tipped towards the latter, as Paul commends, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ..." (Colossians 3:2)

It is clear from the above that where the law is in control and called upon to judge, we are not living in the Spirit or being guided by the Spirit. For where the Spirit reigns there is no law. It is not required. And so it must be the desire of each and every Christian, and each and every member of the Body of Christ to not only live in the Spirit, but also to be guided by the Spirit, as Paul concludes today's reading from the letter to the Galatians.

The point I am making is a simple one: an act of will is required of the Christian. It is a choice between choosing Christ and the Spirit he promises and who is given, or staying in the old ways, which a new life in Christ overcomes. It is further evident that if we choose Christ we are yoked to him and His ways, something we explored at the retreat or on the pilgrimage and almost weekly here at Christ Church. We have freedom, but when we choose Christ we become yoked to Christ. From that moment

on we are to find our freedom in Him who is the Truth and it is the truth of Christ that sets us free and in whose service is perfect freedom. Like Christian love freedom too is to be Christ-shaped. It is to become cross-shaped.

In Our Time, a BBC 4 radio programme hosted by Melvyn Bragg, one of my all-time favourites recently focused on Hegel's Philosophy of History (26.05.22). In light of the terror that ensued during the French Revolution Hegel formulated thoughts about “the intimate connection between certain conceptions of freedom and death. There is a way of conceiving freedom that leads not to freedom, but to death.” *

Even when political freedoms are severely restricted we can still choose Christ, but once we choose Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, freedom in Christ takes on a new shape. We become citizens of God’s kingdom. We may fall into sin many times and then again and again, but the measure remains the same. It is a life lived in the Spirit, which is the measure, who is always guiding us towards love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Christian of freedom, grounded in God’s reality always leads to life.

A new Christian – someone living the life of faith with their whole selves, body, mind and soul, not first as a moral imperative, as a list of dos and don’ts but in the Spirit – will see change in how they perceive the world and in themselves. Sometimes the change is so marked that people will comment or ask about the change a life lived in God’s Holy Spirit has taken. It is the Spirit that empowers and inspires lives ‘of love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.’ Even in ourselves we should notice change, detect shifts towards the above. Some need to discover love, others joy, others generosity, others faithfulness, and so on. And others need to recover a sense of joy, self-control and patience, as God is working his purpose out as year succeeds year.

In light of the above I hope we can better understand and appreciate Jesus’ words as recorded by Luke. They seem harsh to untrained ears. Jesus in no uncertain terms is indicating to those who want to follow that it must not be based on a whim. It demands a person’s all, as Isaac Watts knew all too well when he wrote the hymn ‘*When I survey the wondrous cross.*’ The final stanza reads, “Were the whole realm of

nature mine, That were a present far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

It is evident that the Christian life, although it is a demanding one it is a life giving one, as it turns our world upside down. It questions our values, the values of society, the church today as it seeks to be relevant. Looking too much, it would seem to me, to the world in its confusions rather than to God and waiting on him. The Good News of God in Christ stands in opposition to much of what is transpiring today. It shows, which might seem preposterous to some, a better way, which mustn't be short changed. To borrow a phrase from packaging: Because it says Christian on the outside it doesn't mean it is Christian in the inside. Here we must tread carefully, alert to the words of 1 Peter, “Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” (5.8)

In a little while we will say our farewells to Charles the ministerial experience scheme intern for 2021/22. We thank God for his presence amongst us and for his contributions to the life of Christ Church. It must be said that it was the pandemic that brought Charles to us. Neither we nor the Church of England intern scheme were a part of his planning, but I know from Charles that the year at Christ Church has been a significant one for him in his journey with God. He now has a better understanding of his faith and also the inner workings of a church, although he already knows a lot by being a PK, the son of a priest who is in active local ministry, where there is much joy and love, but also demands and expectations of those in public ministry. Charles has changed. He has noticed the change in himself articulating this change in himself to others. Doors have opened that weren't locked, but they were shut.

We can be a little relieved he won't be slaughtering any oxen today, as a chapter of his life is coming to an end, as God is calling him into God's future, for all time belongs to God. Charles will go forward and he will go forward knowing Christ. Knowing what a demanding task it can be to be a Christian today as Jesus indicates in today's gospel. Rose, who got to know Charles well as they shared a dal or vegetarian curry together in her flat on different occasions, is grateful for the respect that he showed her, as an old timer at Christ Church. Rose said more, but this is what stuck with me, as Rose through her work, the world of academia, has much to do with young adults.

A lasting image for me will be of Charles dashing with purpose to and fro as he helped set up the Street Party to be joined later in the day by his two brothers, who afforded a lasting image of how they with much verve and energy moved Heurige benches and banana boxes with Charles leading! I can still see them striding back and forth along the street outside the church. Were they moving mountains? In Charles's last sermon on Wednesday he asked himself in the presence of five of his school friends who had come to visit, how he can better witness to how his Christian faith gives meaning and purpose to his life and is a source of joy and grace. Very bold I thought!

We began with an image of ploughing inspired by Elijah's call to Elisha, who at the time is ploughing a field. An Austrian Christian newspaper is called *Die Furche*, The Furrow. Its purpose is to break open the ground to plant seeds growing up to eternal life. With Pentecost at the doorstep, a time for ordinations, we recall Jesus' words, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." (Luke 10.2) **Amen.**

* In Our Time, Radio 4, (26.05.22) Hegel's Philosophy of History

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0017k8w>

01.25 ff. Stephen Houlgate, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick

Sally Sedgwick, Professor and Chair of Philosophy at Boston University