

5th Sunday after Trinity at St Mary's, Barnes

First Reading: Galatians 5.1,13-25 Gospel: Luke 9,51-end

Whatever our feelings after the referendum, appalled and depressed, or excited and positive, the Gospel for today drives us back to Christian priorities. However significant the vote we have a larger perspective and a higher loyalty. And as we enter this period of great turmoil the Gospel imperative about this is crystal clear—follow me. Three times in a few verses that word follow is used. The responses Jesus makes to those considering following him are deliberately challenging. First, following Jesus is no easy option. It means a kind of uprooting, a no longer feeling at home in the secular world. Secondly this takes priority over all other claims, however hallowed and thirdly, there can be no looking back. But what does this actually mean in practise? In the context of Jesus's historical ministry, it was quite clear. It meant literally travelling with Jesus as he went round the country announcing the breaking in of God's rule or kingdom into this world. It cannot mean that for us. What it does mean quite simply is keeping close to him spiritually, living in the presence of the one who is always close to us, closer than our own breathing.

As we know, mindfulness is much in vogue at the moment. This helps people to live much more in the present moment, much more aware. Mindfulness goes half way to what the church has always taught— to what Brother Lawrence in his monastery used to call “practising the presence of God” and the French spiritual writer Pierre de Caussade, “the sacrament of the present moment.” The beginning of the day, the end of the day, and every situation in the day is to be lived with heart and mind open.

When I get driven in to the BBC for Thought for the Day I nearly always have a good chat with the drivers, who are usually people originally from abroad. But one recently was a Bermondsey lad whose family had lived there for generations. He asked me what I thought of the new churches springing up, by which I think he meant the new Pentecostal or evangelical churches, often black. I told him and then asked if he had any church connect. No, he said, but he believed in God and prayed. That's good I said, did your mother teach you. No, a friend he replied, and mentioned the well-known serenity prayer in particular. He said he knelt down, but the dog he had then did not seem to like it, so he had to put the dog in another room, but now his new dog, and his wife, seem happy to accommodate his strange going on. Of course I don't ask God for things, he said, that is not

what prayer is about. But it works, he said, it makes a real difference. When I don't do it, I really notice it for the rest of the day. What struck me about what he said, was first, that on the advice of a friend he was willing to do something that seems strange to most people today, Secondly, that it was very real for him, and secondly, his stress on the fact that it made a difference, that it really changed the way the day was lived. God had clearly touched his heart, as he wishes to touch all of us in mysterious ways.

So, to follow Jesus is first and foremost simply to live close to the one who is always close to us. The word follow can also be translated accompany, and that brings out the feel of it. Jesus goes before us into the circumstances of the day and invites us to accompany him there.

Secondly, we may be invited to respond in some particular way. Sometimes this call can mean a real uprooting and change. This is the weekend when women and men in this Diocese and every diocese are being ordained. Some of them will have been called out of others jobs or careers. They have responded to what they and the church has discerned as God's call to them. Albert Schweitzer you will remember was one of the great organists and Bach scholars of the 19th century and a famous theologian. He put it all aside to retrain as a doctor and work as a doctor in Africa. At the end of his most famous book he wrote

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

For most of us the call will not be as dramatic, but we may become aware within ourselves of a response that is needed in some particular way to the claims upon our lives and the priority with which we order them. Then, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian who was hung for his part in the plot against Hitler put it "Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes"

The pattern of the Christian life is one of accompanying and response, of call and obedience. But that does not altogether catch the joy of it. For that we can turn to today's wonderful epistle with its two themes, freedom and being led or guided

by the Spirit. “The Spirit is the source of our life, let the spirit direct its course” he said and “the harvest of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity and self-control. The Spirit is the life of God inside us, illuminating and enabling and bringing that real freedom that true liberation, which St Augustine summed up in the phrase, “whose service is perfect freedom. Responding to, being obedient to the call of God in the circumstances of our lives is no grim thing but a joyful one and it is where and how we find true freedom.

In our national life there are now hugely complex and arrangements and decisions to be made in the months and years ahead, affecting every aspect of life. All the things which our forebears painfully negotiated and we have taken for granted for more than 40 years now have to be re-negotiated: foreign and defence policy with other European nations to counter the threat of Russia and the age old tendency of European nations to quarrel and fight, which of course has not gone away; the common fight against terrorism and international crime, the struggle against corruption which is endemic to the world today, and especially combating anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism and xenophobic nationalism. The fact that we are leaving the EU only heightens need for maximum of co-operation between nations, as never before. None of us here may be great players in all his, but our values and attitudes will all help to create the climate in which can surmount the dangers ahead. Here too Christ goes before us and we are called to accompany him, wait upon his and be alert for the response that is required of us.