

Pentecost 6, (Proper 8) Year C

Luke 9:51-62

Some of us may have fond (or not so fond) memories of going on a long road trip as a child - back in the day before air conditioning was standard in most cars and those in-car DVD players had been even thought of. Driving for hours on end, along dead straight roads that disappeared into the distance. Being crammed into the back seat with siblings and maybe even the family pet. Playing endless games of "I spy" or singing silly songs to try to stave off boredom for just a little while longer. Being plied with lollies to distract you from fighting with your brothers and sisters.

They weren't easy journeys. There was a limit to how much you could pack, so some things had to be left behind, like friends, games and toys. And then there were the comforts of home that also had to be left behind, such as beds, the bathroom and toilet! Going behind a bush on the side of the road might be OK for the boys but not terribly enjoyable for the girls.

If you camped out along the way, you may have washed yourself from a bucket and slept on an air mattress. Dinner might have included powdered potatoes and powdered milk.

It's not hard to imagine how irritable everyone, particularly young children would be by the end of each day, only to go to bed dreading doing it all again the following day.

No matter how fun or novel the journey may have been, it was usually a relief when the car was finally pointed towards home.

Today marks a turning point in Jesus' journey. The journey so far tells us that he was baptised and tempted, he had gathered his disciples, taught and healed; but today marks a major turning point in Luke's gospel account. From now on, Jesus' face points resolutely toward Jerusalem. He's now on the home stretch, but instead of being an easy run, the journey becomes much harder. You see, he knew what lay in wait for him on his way there. He also knew he would suffer and die there on a cruel cross.

When he started toward Jerusalem, the people around him had mixed reactions to his journey.

Some were happy he was going there and would gladly follow him, but others would reject him and made up excuses not to follow him. It's still no different today.

For example, these days we hear of evangelists urging people to choose Jesus and make a decision to accept and love him. Interestingly, whenever people in the bible made the choice to follow him, the result was rarely positive. In most cases Jesus is the one who calls people. He is the one who initiates the relationship.

In this case we're told of someone who would gladly choose to follow Jesus, and Jesus responds with a puzzling comment about foxes and birds. He knew this man wanted to follow him for the wrong reason. He thought Jesus would go to Jerusalem to be crowned King and overthrow the existing government. Well, Jesus would be crowned as King of the Jews, but not in the way first thought. His crown would be made of thorns. His throne would be a cross. His subjects would beat him and kill him.

When trying to understand this riddle about foxes and birds it's easier to understand when we hear Jesus later refer to King Herod as a fox, and remember the standard of the Roman army was an eagle. Herod and the Romans, the foxes and birds, were to stay where they were, but the Son of Man won't rest yet. His permanent home wasn't a palace in Jerusalem. Although people expected and desired it, his journey wasn't to lead people to victory over Herod and the Romans. His journey would instead lead his people through a greater victory over sin, death and the devil.

This makes it a little harder to follow Jesus. It would be easy to follow him if he always guaranteed success or victory for us, but the victory he gives may not be what we're looking for. We might be tempted to think that since Jesus is on our side, we'll have no more problems. We might think if we're faithful enough, pray hard enough, and follow Jesus closely enough, we won't get sick, we'll be successful in everything we do, and we'll always be victorious over our enemies.

But what do we find instead? Others may think something's wrong with us because we worship God. We still get sick despite our heartfelt prayers, and some people don't get better. He doesn't answer our prayers the way we want him to, or even in the time frames we set for him. Our enemies still get the better of us, and we still cry out, 'How long, Lord?' To follow Jesus is no easy journey!

So in today's text, we hear of two occasions when Jesus invited people to follow him. In both of these cases they agree, but ask if they can first go back to their families to bury their dead or to say goodbye.

Since this seems like a reasonable request, we might feel Jesus' reply is a bit harsh. He says the journey is forwards, not backwards. You're to leave your families behind and follow him. The journey with Jesus is to be your only priority. This isn't a casual following as if you can follow Jesus for only an hour a week, or just when it's convenient for you, but it's to be a total commitment to following Jesus which will affect the whole of your life.

So is Jesus being a bit difficult here? Isn't it polite to attend the funeral of your father, or to say goodbye to your family? Can't Jesus just give you a bit of slack?

Well, we don't even know if the man's father was actually already dead! Maybe he was going to wait until his father died before following Jesus. But the call to follow is now, not sometime later. You also can't go home to seek

your family's permission to follow Jesus. They won't want you to follow Jesus. Even if they let you follow Jesus, there's always those comments and looks as you mention you're going to worship you have to put up with. Jesus calls you to follow him straight away without delay and without regret. No matter how much you love them, your dad and your family won't save you.

Maybe you're startled by Jesus' urgent call to follow. Maybe you too want to make up excuses why you should delay your journey with him, or try to justify why you've given up following for a while, or why you don't follow him very closely.

So then, are you prepared to follow Jesus? Are you prepared to make personal sacrifices so that Jesus becomes your total priority? Are you prepared to abandon even family and friends if they're not prepared to follow him? Are you prepared to follow him right now?

We may find it hard to follow him because following Jesus doesn't always meet our expectations. When the disciples noticed people rejecting Jesus they wanted to call down judgment and punishment.

We too often want God to call down punishment on those who stand in our way or don't agree with us. We want God to fix everything and perhaps force people to accept or follow him. This isn't God's way. Although he calls us, he's willing to risk rejection through our freedom of choice. We're free to follow, but we're also free not to follow. There are consequences for each choice.

Even though the cost of following Jesus seems hard to bear, and the people and things we need to be prepared to leave behind seems too hard for us to do, we're reminded of just how much he bore and left behind for us. We're also reminded the end of the journey is like coming home and brings with it joy and peace and life.

Our journey through life is short and fleeting. No matter how long you may stay in the same house, it's still like you're on a camping trip. Your journey with Jesus leads you to your true home. Although sometimes you might want to have a longer holiday, there still comes a time you long for home and head toward your home with joy.

Today Jesus turned for home. He calls us to journey with him to his home. He calls us at our baptism and every time he calls us to renew our baptism through repentance and forgiveness. He calls us through Sunday School, confirmation, and through home devotions. He reminds us this won't be a little stroll with him on Sunday mornings, but a daily walk with him.

The journey is long and will take the rest of our life. The journey involves daily sacrifices. For some of us, it may mean being the only one in our family following Jesus. This is hard and you wish the others would join you, or at least make it less difficult. But be assured you're not alone on this journey as the whole church walks beside you.

As we all travel this narrow and demanding path to Jerusalem, Jesus our leader knows what food and drink we need for the journey. He supplies us with his own body and blood to strengthen us in body and faith. He continues to call us and encourage us with his words of warning and blessing.

This journey involves sacrifice as we walk with Jesus through rejection, pain, suffering, sickness, abuse, and a denying of our own selfish wants and desires. Sometimes following Jesus will affect our relationships with our loved ones. Instead of calling down judgment on them, bear the fruits of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and self-control in the hope it may encourage them to join us. As Jesus knows too well, the journey toward Jerusalem is hard and full of sacrifice, but it's also a journey toward resurrection, glory and heavenly life in the New Jerusalem.

The journey isn't over until you breathe that final breath, trusting firmly in God's promises of salvation; trusting Jesus has already led you through death into life eternal with him. Rest assured that Jesus will carry you through the most difficult parts of the journey. Rest assured when you enter the gates of heaven, Jesus has already paid the entry fee by his own suffering and death. Rest assured he'll give you the strength you need to endure the journey as you head toward your heavenly home.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.