

Sermon: Third Sunday after Pentecost
Theme: The Road Less Travelled
Text: Luke 9:51-62

⁵¹ As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' ⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then he and his disciples went to another village.

⁵⁷ As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'

⁵⁸ Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'

⁵⁹ He said to another man, 'Follow me.'

But he replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'

⁶⁰ Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'

⁶¹ Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.'

⁶² Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'

We all have a story to tell about travel. I could bore you with the tale of my Bike for Bibles ride from Adelaide to Canberra, via Geelong, in 1988. I rode 1723km in 12 days. I can't imagine doing that now. Or driving from Tasmania to Darwin in 1996, leaving Darwin for the return trip at 8.00am in the morning, covering the 1500km to Alice Springs in twelve hours.

There's something about the idea of journey that touches us deeply. Perhaps it is the experience of putting ourselves to the test, to see how much we are capable of. It may be a sense of adventure, of seeing things beyond the boundaries of our back yard, or the setting of our suburb. Journey is also a well-used metaphor for life itself.



Today's reading is full of the language of journey. "**Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem...He sent messengers to go ahead of him...Then they went on to another village...as they were going on the road.**" The whole gospel reads very much like a road movie. But Jesus is not a tourist wanting to see the bright lights of the big city. He is on a mission from God. Luke knows what the ultimate destination is. He writes, "**As the time approached for Jesus to be taken up to heaven.**" It's not Jesus' ascension that Luke is thinking about, but rather his crucifixion, where he will be lifted up to die for the sins of all people.

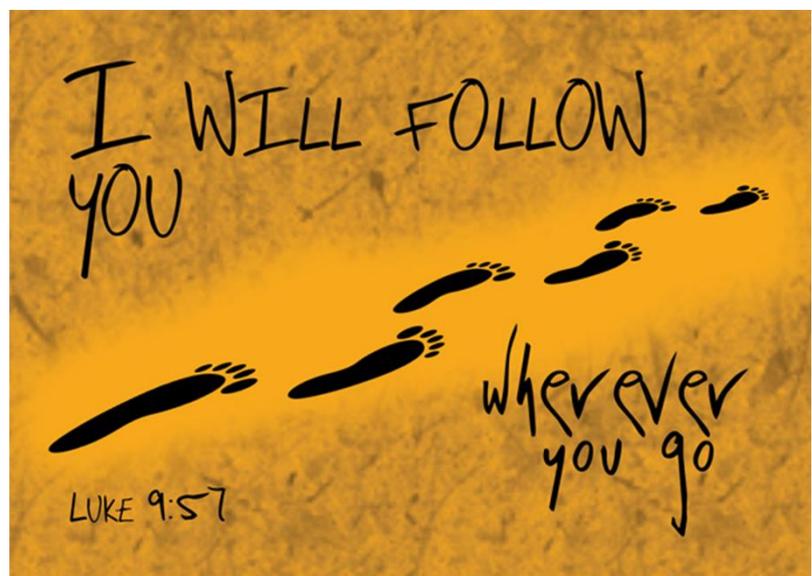
So, off to Jerusalem it is. As we saw last week, going through Gentile territory is always risky. Jesus tries to smooth his path by sending some of the disciples ahead of him to prepare the Samaritan town for his visit. Samaritans had parted company with mainstream Jewish belief hundreds of years earlier. They only acknowledged the first five books of the Old Testament as the Scriptures, and they had a competitor temple at a place called Mt. Gerizim. You may remember the discussion that Jesus had with the Samaritan woman in John 4. They got into a debate about the right place to worship God.

The bad blood continues here. The Samaritans aren't interested in having Jesus visit them. Perhaps they resent him treating their town as a rest stop on the way to Jerusalem. Two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, whom he had nicknamed the sons of thunder are deeply offended on Jesus' behalf, and in the mood for some vengeance. **"They asked Jesus, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them.'**" Perhaps they remembered the incident in 2 Kings, where King Ahaziah sent 50 men to round up Elijah, and in response Elijah called down fire from heaven, and all were killed.

That might have been the old way, but this is not the way Jesus is choosing to walk. He is on his way to Jerusalem to put an end to **"an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."** So, Jesus **"turned and rebuked James and John."** This is the same word used from when Jesus commands evil spirits to get out of people, and when Peter tries to divert Jesus from continuing to the cross. The Samaritan villages aren't going to get what they deserve for being so unwelcoming. In fact, in the very next chapter Jesus uses a Samaritan as an example of God's generous love. And nor will the disciples get what they deserve for their desire for revenge. In fact, none of us will get what we deserve for the messed up, sin-stained things we do and say. All of the punishment we deserve will fall on Jesus' shoulders. That's why Jesus has to get to Jerusalem.

As Jesus travels on, he attracts a great deal of interest. This gives him the opportunity to talk about why he's on his way, and what it means to follow him. Being a disciple is no easy path. Just how tough can be is seen in how Jesus responds to someone who says to him, **"I will follow you wherever you go."**

Jesus counters with the hard news. **"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."** This is no easy ride, no pleasure cruise.



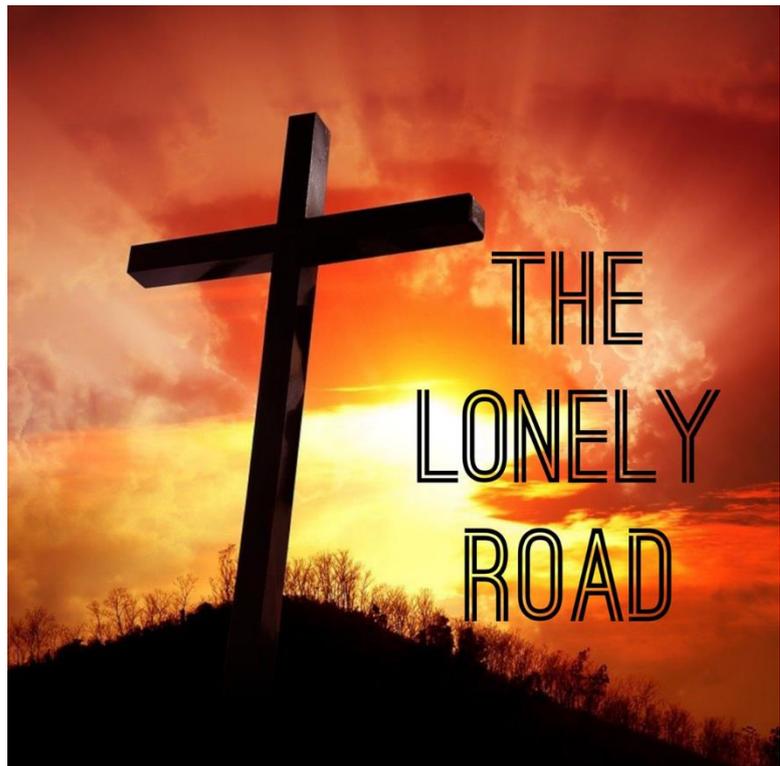
Jesus' next word is even more uncompromising. He asks someone to follow him. The person's answer is equivocal. **"I have to bury my Father first."** This is part of what it means to **"Honour your father and your mother."** Jesus' reply shocks me. **"Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."**

A third person comes along. They, too, want to follow Jesus, but he wants to say goodbye to his family first. That seems fair enough to me. But Jesus thinks otherwise. **“No one who puts a hand to the plough and look back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”** It echoes what Jesus says earlier in this chapter: **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.”**

Who can walk this road with Jesus? If this is discipleship, who’s worthy? If that’s the kind of commitment Jesus wants, I’m left standing by the side of the road. How could I ever think that I was up to this journey? I don’t have what it takes to walk each step with Jesus. But Jesus will keep on walking. And one by one, those who are with him drop off the pace. They are diverted by thoughts of security, stability, a place to lay their heads, somewhere safe.

As the journey reaches its ultimate destination on that hill outside of Jerusalem, Jesus finds himself completely alone. The disciples have fled, for fear, perhaps from shame. He fronts Herod, Pilate and the religious authorities by himself. He is walked to the cross, surrounded by those who taunt him, along the path we now call the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrows. Jesus is nailed to a cross. Even his loving Father abandons him. He is alone in the universe. He goes the way of all humanity in his death.

Is this the end of the road? Mercifully not! Jesus’ pilgrimage to Jerusalem was not for his benefit, but for ours. It was always about the destination. And now this destination has been reached, in raising Jesus from the dead, God the Father confirms the point of the journey.



The writer of the Book of Hebrews reminds us: **‘that we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh).’** The word ‘way’ reminds us of the original Exodus journey. Jesus has travelled on a new exodus, not through the Red Sea into the Promised Land, but through death into the vast land of God’s incredible future.

Jesus travelled on. He kept on going when he was rejected, abused, spoken against, misrepresented. He kept on going when we dropped off, each one of us. It’s not our faithfulness or stamina that counted, but his. And that’s the good news of the kingdom. God isn’t interested in why we failed to arrive, why we gave up when it got too hard. All that matters, to him and for our sake, is the journey that Jesus walked. Christ travels on. He keeps on going. He won’t stop, never stops.

Dr John Kleinig wrote a theme song for the 2000 LCA General Convention of Synod.

**“We travel on a journey, with Jesus as our guide,
for he has gone before us, to bring us back to God:
with Christ we travel on, with Christ we travel on.”**

People say that travel broadens the mind. Christ’s faithful journey to the cross has expanded the possibility of what human life can be. It is far more than just family, friends, comfort, security, enriching and new experiences. All of these are surpassed by the privilege of being called to journey with Christ. He leads and we follow. He calls us to proclaim the kingdom of God, which is the message of life. He urges us to not look back, to what we have been, but to fix our eyes on the cross.

Life in Christ is the journey of a lifetime. But it’s not something you’d see advertised in a travel agent’s window. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, **“The disciple is dragged out of his or her relative security into a life of absolute insecurity.”** In human terms, yes, but in ultimate terms, no. In the words of Dr Kleinig’s song

**“We have our hope in Jesus, a future so secure,
that we will not be shaken when nothing else is sure:
So bold we travel on, so bold we travel on.”**

Because of Jesus’ journey to the cross, we are secure in the love of God. We are free to concentrate on the present and the future journey ahead of us with hope, rather than constantly looking over our shoulders at what we have done or not done. Paul says to us today, **“For freedom Christ has set us free...through love becomes slaves of one another.”**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a classic called: ‘The Cost of Discipleship.’ In it he outlined a vision of a church following Jesus who leads us in the way of discipleship. **‘The church is radical being for others, a Church that does not rule but helps and serves.’** This is the wild ride on which we have been called, through Jesus’ exodus for us. Let’s together walk on this road less travelled. You’ll be amazed where this journey takes you, with Jesus as your strength, your guide, and your Saviour. Amen.