

Luke 9:51-62

Introduction

We're re-joining Luke's Gospel at the start of a new section of his book. The first section happened in and around Galilee and took up the first nine chapters of Luke's book. The final section of Luke's book all happens in and around Jerusalem, culminating in Jesus' death and resurrection. This middle section, which takes up roughly ten chapters, documents the disciples' long, slow journey from Galilee up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way.

The preceding verses have shown us why this journey is necessary. They've ruthlessly exposed the failings of the disciples. Reading them is a bit like watching an episode of *The Apprentice*, where the weaknesses of the candidates are exposed in one task after another and, one by one, they hear the words, "You're fired!" The disciples haven't been fired, but their deficiencies have been laid bare. Their unbelief, their lack of understanding, their lack of humility and an ugly intolerance of others have all been exposed. They've got much to learn if they're going to be the disciples that Jesus wants them to be. This journey from Galilee to Jerusalem is going to be an extended training course. They're going to spend about a year learning from Jesus as they follow him on the way. They're all works in progress. And that should encourage us. Like the disciples, we are all works in progress. We all still have a lot to learn. We're probably all too aware of our own weaknesses and deficiencies. But as we walk the first few steps of this journey with the disciples, in the run up to Easter, we can learn alongside them and be equipped by Jesus for the work he's given us to do. And the first thing we learn in today's reading is about responding to rejection.

That's our first heading: responding to rejection.

Responding to rejection

Look, first of all, at verses 51 to 53.

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.

The clock is ticking. The time is approaching for Jesus to be taken up to heaven, so he resolutely sets out for Jerusalem. Literally, he sets his face for Jerusalem. It's a description that Luke repeats three times in three verses. In verse 51, in the original language, Jesus sets *his face* for Jerusalem. In verse 52, he sends out messengers before *his face*. And in verse 53, the people did not welcome him because *his face* was going to Jerusalem. That repetition is Luke's way of underlining Jesus' single-minded determination to go to Jerusalem en route to heaven.

It's not that he wants to see it as a tourist attraction. It's not that he's got a 'Bucket List' of things he wants to do before he dies, and seeing Jerusalem is one of them. In fact, Luke doesn't refer to his death at all. He says that the time approached for Jesus to be taken up to heaven. To make sense of that, we need to remember the big picture. Luke's Gospel is just volume one of a two-volume set. Luke wrote two books. The first is his Gospel. And the second is the book of Acts. They're a two-volume set. Volume 1, Luke's Gospel, begins with the birth of Jesus and finishes with his death and resurrection. It tells how he accomplishes the salvation of his people and opens the way to heaven, by dying on a cross at Jerusalem. Volume 2, the book of Acts, begins with Jesus' ascension *to* heaven. Then *from* heaven, he sends the Holy Spirit upon his disciples. And then the book of Acts tells how the disciples take the message of salvation out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, empowered *by* the Holy Spirit.

In the context of Luke's two books, Jerusalem is the place where Jesus' earthly ministry reaches its climax before he is taken up to heaven. And it's the starting point for the disciples' world mission, empowered by the Holy Spirit sent to them from heaven. And that explains why this journey is so important. Time is short to prepare the disciples for the work that lies ahead of them. You might have seen stories of community choirs on TV. People from the community audition and form a choir. At the first rehearsal it becomes clear that they've got a lot to learn. But a venue's been booked. A performance has been arranged. And now the pressure's on. The clock's ticking. Time is short for the choirmaster to get them into shape. I wonder whether Jesus felt a bit like that.

The disciples have much to learn. And as they set out with Jesus, the first thing they encounter is rejection.

Most Jews travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem would have skirted around Samaria. It's notable, therefore, that Jesus goes *through* it. It's an indication that his message about the coming kingdom of God is for the Samaritans too. The invitation to be part of the kingdom that he has come to inaugurate includes them. And he sends some of his disciples ahead to get things ready for him. The fact they're described as messengers suggests that they're sent to do more than just find lodgings. Like John the Baptist before them, they go ahead of Jesus to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, calling people to get ready for his arrival. But the people of Samaria aren't interested. They don't want to know. And they refuse to welcome him. Given the animosity that existed between Samaritans and Jews, it's no great surprise. But James and John take it badly.

Verse 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?' But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village.

Why James and John thought they had authority to call down fire from heaven, I have no idea. Jesus' nickname for them was 'sons of thunder'. (Don't you just love the fact that Jesus had nicknames for his disciples! It makes you wonder whether he might have nicknames for some of us.) And theirs was certainly an appropriate one. Their immediate response to people's rejection of Jesus is to want to see God's judgement fall on them.

I wonder whether you feel like that sometimes. Admittedly, it's in my worse moments, but I know that I'm not immune to those kinds of feelings. Perhaps when people reject Jesus and don't want to hear about him, I might inwardly shrug my shoulders and hand them over to God's judgement in my heart. I might write them off. In my worst moments, when people mock Jesus and are hostile to his followers, I might relish the thought of God's judgement coming upon them. What a contrast to the way Jesus thinks. It's an attitude that he rebukes. He has made a point of going to the people of Samaria with the good news of the kingdom. And he refuses to write them off when they reject him.

At the beginning of the book of Acts, he will send his disciples back to Samaria with the good news of the cross. He will send them back to those who refused to welcome him. He doesn't give up hope for them. Why? Because people's rejection of Jesus is not necessarily the final word. The gospel can still bear fruit even among those whose initial response is rejection.

Jesus is a gracious and compassionate King. He came to die for those who reject him. And he is patient with people. He gives people second chances. That's what the disciples need to learn. Of course, those who persist in rejecting Jesus will eventually suffer judgement. But that's not for us to decide. We must leave that to God and his timing. Our job is to proclaim the gospel, and to keep doing so. Even when people's initial response is to reject him, we're to show the graciousness of Jesus.

Who do you know who's refusing to welcome Jesus? There will be people you wouldn't dream of giving up on. I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about work colleagues, neighbours, acquaintances, who haven't got the slightest interest in Jesus. Let these verses challenge how you think of them and how you treat them. Don't write them off. The gospel can still bear fruit even among those whose initial response is rejection.

Or perhaps, like the Samaritans, your initial response to Jesus *has been* rejection. But please know that the invitation to take your place in God's kingdom is still open to you. Jesus is being patient with you. He's giving you time to welcome him as your King and Saviour. He's giving you second chances. Please don't make your rejection of him your final word. Receive him today, while you still have the chance. If you want to know how to do that, then please do speak with me after the service. Please don't leave it for another day.

So then, as Jesus prepares the disciples for the work of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, the first thing they need to learn about is handling rejection. They need to be ready

to face rejection. And as we're about to see, that theme of rejection is still present in the verses that follow. But the next thing the disciples need to learn is about setting priorities. And that's our second heading: setting priorities.

Setting priorities

Please look down at verses 57 and 58.

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

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

This man's response to Jesus seems exemplary. He sounds keen and committed – just the kind of follower we might think Jesus would want. But Jesus warns him rather than encouraging him.

The way of life Jesus describes here is one of isolation and exclusion. For those who followed him on the way to Jerusalem, it would mean accepting homelessness. That had been the experience of the disciples in Samaria. If they had gone looking for lodgings, none had been found. No one had taken them in. They had not been welcome. And that rejection is what his disciples should expect, Jesus says.

It's what we should expect. We may not be homeless. But nonetheless, if we would follow Jesus, we should expect to find ourselves being isolated and excluded from society. If the message of Jesus and his kingdom is rejected, then we shouldn't be surprised to find ourselves being rejected. Although it doesn't make it any easier, it should come as no surprise if we're the ones who are the butt of people's jokes... if we're the ones who are maligned... if we're the ones who are overlooked when others are being invited to a party.

It's that isolation that Jesus is warning about. And it's only those who can accept that who will persist as his disciples. And it's only those who will focus on the task ahead of us who are fit for service, Jesus says.

Look at verse 59.

He said to another man, 'Follow me.'

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

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

The man's request appears reasonable. Surely, it's right to honour your father and mother and show your love for them, especially in death. After all, isn't that one of the Ten

Commandments? In that light, Jesus' words seem outrageous. But Jesus is emphatic: **'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'**

Jesus is saying that we've got a job to do. And even the most serious of responsibilities mustn't keep us from it. Even the very best of excuses – and this *is* the very best of excuses – isn't good enough. If the choice is between burying the dead or following Jesus, then Jesus must come first.

The next conversation helps to clarify what Jesus means.

Verse 61.

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

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

If you're ploughing a field, what you're aiming for is long, straight furrows. That means fixing your eyes on the ground ahead of you, guiding your plough in a straight line. Straight furrows are not what you get if you're constantly looking back, over your shoulder. If that's what you do, then the plough's going to weave all over the place and you're going to end up with crooked furrows. Or worse, you'll stop altogether. Such a person isn't fit for the job.

And Jesus says it's the same with discipleship.

We've been given a job to do: to proclaim the kingdom of God. As we've seen, it's a job that will bring rejection and isolation. We may well lose the respect of our families and neighbours. We may well lose friends. But to look back at what we're leaving behind is to risk being knocked off course and stopping altogether. We'll only be fit for service if we give our attention wholly to what lies ahead of us.

Jesus isn't saying that we should stop honouring our parents or loving our families. But he is saying that following him involves a radical re-ordering of our allegiances. To be a disciple means putting him before all others.

When we come to a fork in the road... when we must choose between loyalty to Jesus or loyalty to our families, then loyalty to Jesus must come first. And if that's true of our families, then it's true of all our relationships. When we must choose between loyalty to Jesus or preserving our friendships, then loyalty to Jesus must come first.

He's calling for a whole-hearted commitment that puts his kingdom before everything and everyone else. We can't afford to look back at what we've left behind. We must keep our eyes fixed on what lies ahead and the job we've been given. Following Jesus comes before all else.

Conclusion

These verses are challenging, there's no doubt about it. And we need to allow ourselves to feel the challenge.

Next week, we'll see the joy the disciples experience as they follow Jesus and give themselves whole-heartedly to the task of proclaiming the kingdom of God. Remember how this passage started. It started with Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem. He's on his way to the cross to win salvation and open the way to his Father in heaven.

Next week, he'll tell his disciples to rejoice because their names are written in heaven. If you belong to Jesus, your name's written in heaven too. That's your destination. And if that's not cause for rejoicing, then I don't know what is.

But as keen as we might be to get to *that* passage and something more positive, we mustn't rush ahead. Jesus begins by laying out the commitment he demands from those who follow him. There's no small print with Jesus. He doesn't hide away the commitment he seeks like a dodgy legal contract. He's up front about it. And the challenge for us is whether we're willing to give it. We need to hear that challenge and reflect on it and recognise what Jesus demands of us.

Let me finish with some words from J. C. Ryle. He was the Bishop of Liverpool back in the 19th century. He had a wonderful writing style and if you've never read any of his books I'd strongly suggest doing so. He wrote this, which captures the commitment Jesus expects:

Let your words, and works, and ways, and tempers all tell the same story. Let not your life be a poor torpid life, like that of a tortoise or a sloth; – let it rather be an energetic stirring life, like that of a deer or bird. Let your graces shine forth from all the windows of your conversation, that those who live near you may see that the Spirit is abiding in your hearts. Let your light not be a dim, flickering uncertain flame; let it burn steadily, like the eternal fire on the altar, and never become low. Let the savour of your religion, like Mary's precious ointment, fill all the houses where you dwell. – Be an epistle of Christ so clearly written, penned in such large bold characters, that he who runs may read it. Let your Christianity be so unmistakable, your eye so single, your heart so whole, your walk so straightforward that all who see you may have no doubt whose you are, and whom you serve. (J. C Ryle, *Old Paths*, Banner of Truth, p. 137)

Let's pray.

Loving Father, please help each of us to be whole-hearted, fully committed followers of Jesus, even though we may face rejection and isolation. Please help us to have our eyes fixed forward as we follow him, without looking back. And help us to be fruitful in his

service as we go about the work that he has given us to do. We ask it in his name and for your glory. Amen.