

**“Living our identity” a sermon based on 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 and Luke 9:51-62 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on 30 June 2019.**

We human beings have a setting – automatic mode. It’s easy to get there – familiar step one, familiar step two and we are in automatic mode. It can happen in worship. Familiar place, familiar people, familiar order. “O, we’re up to the sermon already.” There is value in the familiar. The same God, yesterday, today, forever. The same gospel of grace, yesterday, today, forever.

But what if we came to worship expecting to experience a different dimension of God, or engage a new truth about God, or hear a different call of God, to meet God again but for the first time. It happened to me about a month ago. A speaker, Will Willimon, asked a couple of questions and I have been living with them since. Where does Jesus promise convenience? Where does he promise that life will be easier? Where does he promise anything other than a life with God? That spirit is in the readings today.

We heard last Sunday of Yahweh defeating the prophets of Baal, despite which Elijah shrinks into a cave, out of which Yahweh calls him. Up on the mountain, Elijah hears Yahweh in the sound of sheer silence. Now there’s a backdrop to this – the kings of Israel were leading Israel away from the covenant God. King Ahaziah responded to a health crisis by turning to the Canaanite god, Baal-Zebub, rather than by seeking a word from Yahweh. The future of Israel hung in the balance and the prophet Elijah was determined to turn Israel towards Yahweh. But his ministry was coming to an end and in light of the people’s ambivalence, Israel needed a strong prophetic ministry. So Elijah comes off the mountain and he is walking through the field. He comes across a farmer ploughing the field with his oxen, and he places his cloak, his mantle, on the farmer’s shoulder. Elisha promptly says he wants to follow Elijah. But first, he says, let me say good bye to my parents. Which Yahweh encourages him to do. Then Elisha kills the oxen, shares food among the people, and sets off. But three times Elijah pushes Elisha back – you cannot go where I am going. Elisha won’t quit, but he needs more than determination. Using the ancient inheritance laws as a guide, Elisha asks to be treated as an elder son, to receive a double inheritance. Give me the most

precious thing you have, Spirit. It's not something Elijah can give. All I can do is tell you, says Elijah, is to keep your eyes open, pay attention, so you are ready when the call comes. Elisha asks the question which guides all followers of God - What is God up to and how can I be part of it?

That story has its strong echo in the reading from Luke. Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem. The disciples are passing through Samaria and they ask if they should call down fire to consume the Samaritans just as Yahweh had dealt to the prophets of Baal. Jesus refuses and rebukes them. Then we turn to three exchanges. People come up to Jesus wanting to be part of his movement, but they have a few commitments to take care of before they join him in his march to Jerusalem. One has to bury his recently deceased father. The other must bid farewell to the family at home. After all, doesn't scripture tell us to honour our parents? Are these not family values?

Jesus will have none of it. With a brusque "Let the dead bury their dead," he moves on without them. Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem, to engage the powers of the day.

Willimon tells of a woman who has been not only terribly disappointed by her young adult son, but also verbally and emotionally abused by him. One day he stormed out of the house, slammed the door and left in a rage. Shortly thereafter he was sent to prison for a year, having burgled a house to support his drug habit.

What does the mother do? She goes to the prison every week. For the first couple of weeks he refused to see her; then, he relented a little and met with her in the visiting room, but the guards had to remove him because of his abusive language toward her. She came back the next week. Eventually, he relented a little more, and now she comes and they talk quietly together. She is the only person who ever visits him.

"I am determined not to give him the last word," she says. "I am not going to let him define this situation. I've got a claim on his life, and I intend to collect."

The resolute determination that sets a face toward Jerusalem, refusing to let an emperor or empire have the last word. That is the call on Jesus.

What does it mean for us?

Jesus calls us to radical commitment to the gospel, so it shapes us and everything about us.

Willimon says that while he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, he received complaints from parents. Many of those complaints boiled down to just one complaint. His phone would ring and the parent would say, "What did you all do over there at Duke? Our daughter went to school to become a research scientist but now she says she is going to become a medical missionary to Haiti. You ruined her life. Why did you do that!?"

Now these two passages and the concept behind them – call and response – are central to understanding the Christian life and how the Church organises itself. I want to speak about it because the idea of the Church as just another organisation can too easily take hold. It's easy to belittle these ideas.

The idea of call and response applies to all ministries – ministers, elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders – to everything.

When I sensed a call to ministry, I visited my former minister, Owen Baragwananth. His advice – "Don't go into the ministry if you can avoid it." He was saying that I needed to be sure, as far as possible, that it was God calling me. Every step since has been the same. Is this to what God is calling us? The ministry is not a career. There is no ladder to climb, no congregation better than another. And when our own sense of call is confirmed by the Church's process, then these words of Jesus take hold – "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Putting a hand to the plough, and trusting in the providence of God saves us from wasting time looking back wondering what might have been. Setting our face to Jerusalem, living out the call. What freedom there is in such trust, what deeper joy, as we put our hand to the plough and make the most of what God has done, often when we cannot explain it.

And this is true beyond the gathered church, of every vocation.

I have spoken before of a friend, a general practitioner. When he graduated he could have gone anywhere. But he kept praying, asking God where God wanted him, what he was being called to. For nearly thirty years he has been a doctor in a small remote town in the north island. It has meant much less money, long drives, much inconvenience. But the joy is deep, and medical students work with him to learn what it means to be a general practitioner.

Jesus calls us to follow. All he promises is life with God, and the deep joy that comes in trusting that we are living God's purpose for us.

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