

Trinity 2, Eucharist

1 Kings 19:5-16,19-end, Galatians 5:1,13-25, Luke 9:51-end

Father Christopher

Rules. Who here likes rules? Who here thinks that Christianity likes rules? We had a day recently with all the clergy of the Kensington area, in which Bishop Graham suggested that we all think about what a parish Rule of Life might look like. The idea is a monastic one, agreeing, for example, that everyone will try, say, to spend a bit of time reading the bible every week, and a little time in prayer every day. And maybe commit to doing some regular charity work.

Mother Emma and I rather liked the idea, and thought it fitted well with our newly agreed priority here of discipleship. One of our colleagues however really hated the word 'rule'. For him it implied that Christianity is about rules, rather than about being saved through the grace of Christ. We are saved through faith in Christ, not by following rules, which is what the Jewish Law was. And yet, a large part of being a Christian is living in a certain way, isn't it?

As Saint James says in his letter, '*Faith without works is dead.*' What's the good in believing everything that we as Christians believe, but then never lifting a finger to help anyone else? How genuine can your faith be, in other words, if it never has any effect on how you live your life? Now, the ideal is probably that we are so full of the Spirit, so full of love for God and one another, that we just instinctively spend our whole time praying and helping others, because our faith is so central to who we are.

But how many of us is that person? Not me, I can tell you that!

St Paul in our second reading, from his letter to the Galatians, addresses a similar problem in the first Christians: they might have been freed from the Law, but they had given in to what are described as the desires of the flesh. That isn't just sins involved with the body, but anything that isn't of the spirit, including jealousy and quarrelling, as well as drunkenness, gluttony – eating too much - and the more obvious sexual sins. In other words, people were saying: this Christianity thing is great, I can believe in Jesus and then do anything I want!

St Paul is saying, if you actually give yourself to Christ and to your faith in Him, and to love, you will become slaves of one another. You will become gentle, kind, generous, controlled.

Similarly, those people who approached Jesus and told Him that they wanted to follow Him, wanted to do so in a way which fitted in with the rest of their life, not that changed it. Jesus's response seems harsh. These are the only people in the gospel whom we are told voluntarily said that they wanted to follow Jesus, rather than being told by Jesus to 'Follow me.' And rather than responding, as we in church might, 'Great, you're very welcome! Why don't you see how you find it? See how it goes', Jesus says, 'Well, try to follow me if you like, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.' In other words, it won't be easy, far from it.

To the other, whose father has died, He says, 'Let the dead bury their own dead.' Shocking; unkind, we might think.

We know from many other occasions though, that Jesus often used hyperbole to emphasise His point: in the process perhaps shocking His hearers, but they certainly remembered what He had been saying!

All of these readings do raise the question though of what our commitment to our faith means to us. And the difficult point that Jesus makes is that there are no half measures: you either follow Him or you don't. And if you follow Him, your whole self is required; you have to love Him, God, with all your heart, mind, body, soul and strength, and your neighbour as yourself.

This is not easy, and you will fail and fail again, but your commitment to give yourself to God cannot come with reservation. You can't, for example, decide that today you're feeling a bit grumpy, so won't help anyone. That person who asks you for help has a call on you as a Christian.

That is not to say that you can't spend time considering whether you want to commit, thinking about whether it's really for you, or indeed in trying to grow and deepen your faith. All or nothing is fine on one level, but developing our faith is also the journey of a lifetime.

How do we live out and really inhabit that total commitment that Jesus talks about; and foster those gifts of the Spirit which St Paul writes about? Well, this is where I think rules have their place. Not that salvation, or closeness to God, is something we can earn through our own efforts; but we can draw closer to God, and allow Him the space to change us to be more and more like His Son, if we develop what I will call holy habits:

By deciding that you are going to do some charity work every week and pray a little before bed, or when you get up, perhaps by joining our wonderful Zoom Morning Prayer group here, or by using an app or just by sitting in silence on your own; By deciding to adopt some disciplines along these lines in your life you will gently start to change, and become closer to God, and indeed your brothers and sisters. This is not about you earning your salvation, but about allowing God into your life to change you, from the inside.

It is not like deciding you are going to go to the gym every week in the sense that you can then feel proud at having developed this chiselled physique, or having reduced your waistline, depending on your priority, all by yourself. But it is rather like going to the gym in the sense of developing your 'holy muscles' as it were. The more you do good, the more you pray, the more it will become just what you do, and who you are, more importantly.

St Paul talks about freedom. And in talking about the desires of the flesh - and remember, this is not just sexual sins, and the thought that St Paul is really just one almighty prude has given him rather an unfair rep - he tells us that those desires can '*prevent you from doing what you want.*' And how true that is. Whether it is tendencies or addictions to things we don't actually want to be doing - alcohol and drugs being the most obvious perhaps, but increasingly in our society also pornography, or just plain greed; or whether it's just not being as generous towards others as we would like; almost all of us probably have some gap between the person we would like ourselves to be, and the person we are on a day to day basis. And in that sense St Paul is very psychologically astute, rather than being a first century prude with nothing relevant to say to our age.

Yes, there is that decision to make in response to our call as Christians: do we follow Jesus, with all that we are, just as Elisha followed after Elijah? But we also need to work on developing ways in which we can live that out, and continue to deepen our faith. Finding that time every day to pray, reading scripture and other books which are likely to deepen our understanding of Christianity; making sure we help others, personally, and in our giving. Perhaps even finding a spiritual director to make sure that we keep challenging ourselves and growing - asking Mother Emma or me for a chat about where you are spiritually.

None of this is rocket science, but it does take ongoing work and commitment in response to God's call to each and every one of us. 'I will follow you.' I hope we can say that in response to Jesus's call, or work towards the point where we can.

The other question for us, as we each, and all together, put our hand to the plough though, is what that means for the whole of our life. And there is no need to look back, because while it does take hard work, and isn't always easy, in serving Him we do, and will, find our ultimate freedom. Amen