**Living and guided by the Spirit – ploughs, yokes and hard roads to follow**

Imagine for a minute you are lost in the middle of a town you have never visited before. You may well be using satnav of one type or another but, as you have probably discovered, everyone else knows exactly where they are and going to and become impatient with your indecision at every junction because the instruction to turn left, right or straight on is not keeping up with you. What you need at that moment is for someone to slip into the passenger seat, knowing the town and guide you on reaching your destination.

Now, how does this story help us in working out what our passages are telling us?

If we start with Elijah -

Exhaustion has rendered Elijah a complete wreck, unable to function or think. He is the only remaining prophet left and Queen Jezebel intends to deal with him as she has with the others. He is toast and all he wants to do is die. And yet by the concluding verses of the reading Elijah back on course and Elisha is his anointed successor.

Elijah, in running away, does not doubt the existence of God. What he is showing us though is an example of how it is to be human in the face of God. What Elijah is doubting is his own effectiveness in God’s service and possibly God’s commitment to him. God’s response is interesting particularly when we consider other episodes in the bible where death has followed disobedience or being turned into a pillar of salt. He doesn’t chastise or punish Elijah for running away and wanting to die, but instead, like a caring father, nourishes him, allows him sleep and restores him back to health so that he can continue in his service. Also, most importantly, God provides him with colleagues, people to share the load.

Those of us who have been in the Ministry Team during Mike’s tenure have been aware of how well he nurtured a team around him, to spread the load and enable the parish to flourish. We do hear of horror stories of other parishes where vicars implode under the weight of trying to run a parish single-handed. More is possible if we team up with others; a problem shared is a problem solved. Also, in Elijah’s case, it provides succession.

One of the things we need to look at is the contrast in the somewhat relaxed approach of Elijah to Elisha’s request to bid farewell to his past life before following Elijah with the harsh words of Jesus in Luke – “no one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”. What are we to make of that! Are we to take Jesus’ meaning literally or is something lost through translation from the Greek to English? A more precise translation from the Greek to English, would be: “keeps looking back”. And that does give us a different emphasise that perhaps we feel less uncomfortable with (although I’m not sure that is the right approach) but effectively softens the words of Jesus. what can’t be ignored is the message behind the words. What Jesus is actually saying is - My friends, a life of discipleship cannot be a part-time, once-in a while, off and on commitment. It is a life-changing shift in direction, a shift in priorities in which our own human needs and wants become subservient to Christ's call to share and LIVE God's transforming love and grace in this world.

We do need to be able to comprehend this point and I think are supposed to feel uncomfortable with the message Jesus is trying to put across to the disciples; following Jesus is not easy, nor should we expect it to be. He is providing a heavy dose of realism to the disciples who might be enjoying following Jesus about, pointing out the failings of others and musing over whether they should bring down fire on others rather than seeing their own shortcomings. So he is rather puncturing their delusions of grandeur.

Paul, to the Galatians develops the point Jesus is making. He is providing the Galatians with two alternative approaches to life which are diametrically opposed. The way of the ‘flesh’ or the way of the spirit. A better translation of: “way of the flesh” is as “the way of the world” and perhaps helps us to appreciate what Paul is trying to tell us. If we follow the “way of the world” then Christ will not be our benchmark. Paul, in his direct way of putting it, is saying that if you chose to live in a worldly way then you will not inherit the kingdom of God. And as ever, that is our choice. Which will we follow? That is basically what Jesus is telling the disciples.

Paul is encouraging the Galatians and us, to live by the Spirit and be guided by the Spirit.

Christ, our guide, says Paul, will ensure that we follow the way that is marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity etc. So, which navigation system are we going to follow – are we going to allow ourselves to be nudged and guided by the Spirit or by the compulsions and obsessions of the world? Referencing back to our Luke passage, Jesus does sound harsh, he is pulling no punches; but then time is short, the clock is ticking as he sets his face towards Jerusalem. If we listen to Paul and follow his directions, then we should have a better understanding of how to keep on the right track.

Jesus, is heading off on a difficult road leading him to Jerusalem; it is a moment of intense commitment, Jesus only knows what the destination will yield and yet he does not deviate from the path his father has for him. He knows his destiny but still needs to get there. Those that reject him on the way anticipates the great rejection that he will face in Jerusalem. Maybe that knowledge wrought that terse exchange from him!

As Jesus takes the Jerusalem Road, so the destiny of many others is played out. Jesus is harder on the ‘would be’ disciples who make the right noises but lack the urgency Jesus is looking for something more than from the Samaritans who refuse to give him hospitality. Rejection can be forgiven but lukewarm or insincere acceptance grates because it misunderstands the ultimate nature of Jesus’ call.

The road to Jerusalem, Jesus promises is no easy road. The way we are called to follow as Christians is no easy road, it is “the way of the cross”. This is very challenging for all of us; we may well look for and hope that our faith and spiritual life will bring us peace but it should not be the peace of self-satisfaction. The kingdom of God demands more.

So – for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. …..Live by the Spirit. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. …. No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

Amen