

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Those of us who enjoy watching tennis will have an added reason for staying up late in the next two weeks. We will be hoping to watch Ash Barty make her way to the finals of Wimbledon. If we are a cricket lover, we will be keeping an eye on Australia as the ODI World Cup comes towards its conclusion. But as we watch the best tennis and cricket players in the world, we might well remember that they are the best players, not just because of their natural talent but because of their dedication and singlemindedness. They have put their hands to the plough, and they do not look back.

In today's gospel we meet three people who don't know anything about tennis or cricket but are keen to play in the team of disciples that Jesus is gathering around him. They present themselves to Jesus as he sets out on his journey towards Jerusalem. Luke explains why Jesus is making that journey, "As the time drew near for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely took the road to Jerusalem." The literal Greek says that "he hardened his face to go." Here is the first of the many allusions to Jesus making his way to Jerusalem as a prophet. As we hear Jesus being taken up to heaven, we might remember how God prepared to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind. In Ezekiel, the Son of Man is told to set his face against Jerusalem and to prophesy against the land of Israel.

When Jesus and the disciples meet opposition from the Samaritans, James and John want to call down upon them fire from heaven. In the Second Book of Kings we read how Elijah called down fire from heaven upon his enemies.

The only time in the gospels that we meet someone who volunteers to follow Jesus is in today's gospel. Everyone else follows Jesus because they are called to do so. I think that can remind us all that we are followers of Jesus not because we thought it was a good idea, but because we are responding to the grace of being called to be one of his followers. Being a disciple is a grace for which we need to thank God every day.

The volunteer we meet today must have had a big heart. He was able to say, "I will follow you wherever you go." But Jesus warns him that it may cost more than he was ready to pay. If we are in the company of the Son of Man we, like him, may have nowhere to lay our heads. The role of a prophet can demand homelessness.

The next man doesn't seem to be a volunteer, but someone called to follow Jesus. He seems willing but he is not yet ready to leave his family. The obligation to bury the dead is not a trivial one, but an expression of the fourth commandment. Jesus challenges him to leave

that responsibility with the other members of his family who have not been called to the new life of following him. We don't know if he took up that challenge.

The third person that Jesus meets along the road may have volunteered to follow Jesus. But he puts some conditions upon setting out on the journey. "Let me first go and say goodbye to my people at home." His request takes us to the story that we read as our first reading today, from the First Book of Kings. Elijah is sent by God to call Elisha and anoint him to be his successor as a prophet of God. At first, he hesitates. He asks to go and kiss his father and mother first. Elijah makes a strange response to that request. "Go, go back, for have I done anything to you?" Elisha must have interpreted that as saying go back if you want to, but the call to be a prophet doesn't even allow that. Elisha dramatically showed that he was ready to leave everything, by slaughtering the oxen and burning the plough as a sacrificial offering to God.

We are not told if that third man in the gospel took up the challenge of putting his hand to the plough of preaching the kingdom of God and not looking back.

Where are we with all of this? What Jesus seems to be demanding may seem to be too much for us? Perhaps the first thing we need to do is to recognise how many links

Luke makes between Jesus and the prophets. The Jesus that we are called to follow is not only the one who reveals God's unconditional love for us, but he is the Prophet who continually challenges us to respond with all our hearts to that love. Our response is not meant to be conditional or on our own terms. It is a radical response made possible by the grace that is poured into our hearts.

I think Paul is saying something about that today in his letter to the Galatians. "My brothers and sisters, you were called, as you know, to liberty, but be careful, or this liberty will provide an opening for self-indulgence. Serve one another, rather, in works of love, since the whole of the Law is summarised in a single command: Love your neighbour as yourself." He then describes that work of loving one another as the work of the Holy Spirit alive within us. If we let the Spirit guide us, we will be in no danger of self-indulgence.

As we watch tennis from Wimbledon or cricket from Lords, perhaps we could think of the talent of the sportspeople that we see as being like God's grace for us. The focus they have on the game they are playing can challenge our focus on the Lord that we follow. The hard work that they do to play at their best, may remind us of our efforts to cooperate with the call and the grace to be disciples of the Lord.