

*Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall*

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*Setting our Faces: Determined to follow*

Determination is a wonderful thing. Elisha was determined not to let Elijah go and yet picks up the mantle of leadership.

Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem.

Determination is that drive that keeps us focussed on something larger than ourselves.

It isn't always comfortable or cosy, but often involves taking a risk.

It is often much easier to put things off.

Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem.

This is the beginning of the end, the hinge point of the story that Luke tells.

Up until this point Jesus has been teaching, healing and calling followers.

Now he has made the decision.

He has set his face.

He is journeying to the end, the outpouring of love for all upon the cross.

He has decided to set his face, giving his life away to suffer and die in the confidence that God will raise him from the dead.

This story marks the beginning of a travelogue, with stories along the way.

Here at the outset Jesus walks along and we discover something of what it means to be on pilgrimage with Jesus.

The Christian Journey is never about standing still.

It is always a journey that is moving on.

Instead of a triumphal start, this journey begins with rejection.

The Samaritans reject Jesus because his face his set, because Jerusalem is the goal, suffering and dying are ahead.

Jesus sets his face and continues, not with violence but with love.

Along the way Jesus has three encounters with would be followers. A couple offer themselves, and one is approached: follow me.

Yet each time Jesus responds in a way designed not to win friends and influence people.

There is no soft sell, he is honest about the challenge.

This does not appear to be the most productive way to operate.

Can you imagine an advertising campaign using these responses as encouragement to get on board! Not likely!

Fear campaigns have nothing on Jesus' words here.

How would you react if you had magnanimously said I'll follow you wherever you go and are bluntly told that you'll be homeless.

The second and third encounters are both a variation of yes, but first.

First let me bury my father – seems a legitimate reason to delay, surely family is important.

I will follow you but first let me say farewell – another reasonable response you'd think.

Yet Jesus' response to them shocks them out of their comfort zone.

What on earth is Jesus on about here?

He is raising the stakes and deliberately saying things to shock.

Jesus is saying that the call of God is urgent and can't be put off.

The today of God's reign is now and there is no time to waste.

His call is meant to shock us out of our complacency.

It is meant to get us to look at what we value from God's perspective.

Often we want to follow, yet things get in the way.

We say we can't, I'm not ready, I'm too busy, etc.

I wonder how Jesus would put this challenge to us today?

I think one of things that gets in the way for us is distractions.

We find our lives consumed by all sorts of things.

Often things appear fine, yet we can often put our own needs and reactions in front of the universal love of God.

What I find interesting in this story of would-be followers is that we don't hear how they respond – whether or not they join the way.

Perhaps that is the point of the story. It is an invitation to us, to how we respond to Jesus' call to follow.

I can see myself in each of these three would be followers, the big grand gesture, the yes buts and the divided commitment, the desire for the comfortable life that doesn't challenge too much.

It is easy just to settle in and be used to the same old ways of doing things be comfortable.

Yet Jesus call is for us to set our faces, to be determined and as focussed as he is on the love of God and giving that love away.

This call is not about looking back nostalgically to some time in the past.

It is about taking the risk to follow Jesus into the today of God's kingdom.

It is to take the focus off ourselves.

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem was not for himself, but about giving his life away in trusting the love of God through him.

There is an urgency today to be involved in God's mission which is always about reaching out to the other.

There is an urgency to be involved in God's mission to rescue human beings for life in a world that often seems to be sliding to destruction.

How can we be a pilgrim church, a walking church generated by the gospel and finding our purpose in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom?

It is about building bridges, not barriers, to build bridges of love rather than barriers of fear so that human beings can flourish.

Jesus set his face in the way of God's love. Follow me he says.

To be a centre of God's love and hope here in Canterbury it is about being a place of welcome and hospitality, where we meet others where they are and spread seeds of love and care.

It is to know that it isn't something we do entirely by our own energy, but is about how we set our faces towards God and draw on the love of God in our prayer and in our worship.

Crossbound God,  
nothing protects you from open sky and beckoning grave:  
Teach us to leave behind  
The fear that kills what is different,  
Our love for what is dead and safe;  
May we set our face like you  
To find our true home,  
Our unexpected city of peace,  
Your fearless life;  
Through Jesus Christ, who will not turn back. Amen.

*Lections:*

*2 Kings 2.1-2, 6-14*

*Ps 77.1-2, 11-20*

*Galatians 5.1, 13-25*

*Luke 9.51-62*