Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead
Luke 9:57-62

Today is the last in our summer series on the hard sayings of Jesus. And we're going out on the passage read to us from Luke 9. A man tells Jesus he'll follow him once he's buried his father, and Jesus says, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead." Why would he say that? Because that sounds kind of harsh, doesn't it?

The Call
In his book, the City of God, and it's a fat book, St Augustine argues that the world is made up of two cities, the City of Man and the City of God. And throughout history, beginning with Adam, through the tower of Babel, and Babylon and Rome and up to today, everywhere you look is the City of Man, humanity pursuing life apart from God. But mixed in among them is the City of God, the people of God. But this city is different, because it's a city on pilgrimage in the world, heading for the eternal city, the heavenly Jerusalem.

And, of course, Augustine gets that picture of the people of God on pilgrimage in the world from the Bible. The writer to the Hebrews says of Christians, 'For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.' (Heb 13:14).

Well, what's that got to do with this passage? It's that when Jesus says what he says here, he's on the road: v57, 'As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."' And the keyword in this passage is 'follow'. The first man approaches Jesus on the road and tells him, 'I'll follow you'. Then Jesus approaches another man on the road and invites him to follow him. And then a third man comes like the first and says, "I'll follow you."

And they all happen on the road. And yet, Luke doesn't tell us how any of the three respond to Jesus' challenge. And the reason for that is that Luke wants us to examine our own response.

You see, to become, and to be, a Christian is a call to discipleship, a call to follow Christ, to walk the road of life with him leading you. It's a call to become a part of the City of God on pilgrimage in the world. It's a call to enter, and then proclaim, the Kingdom of God, and have that fundamentally influence everything else you think about life or do in your life.

And Luke presents us with these three men that Jesus interacts with because they highlight two responses that can hinder you from enjoying the fullness of the Kingdom, that will keep you from experiencing the depth of life of the City on pilgrimage.

The Cost
Now, when a newcomer comes to Westlake, the person who brings them, or maybe the welcome team at the door, will put in the effort of making them feel welcome, of introducing them to some nice people. Because it's obvious isn't it? We want people to come back, we want people to stick.

And it's not just churches that do that. Any political party or movement will do all it can to attract new members, and have them sign up to the cause. Any leader worth his or her salt will will do whatever they can to get you to sign on the dotted line. They might waive the membership fee, give you additional benefits, soft-sell the commitment, all to get your involvement.

Except Jesus. Because look how he responds when the first man comes to him, v57, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus responds, v58, "Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." You really want to follow me? Well how do you fancy being homeless?

It's not exactly a winning strategy to recruit a mass-member movement to change the world, is it? It's almost as if Jesus is trying to put him off!

I mean, here is a guy seemingly offering himself to Jesus unconditionally: 'Jesus, I'm going to follow you come what may. I'm going to hold nothing back. Wherever you go, I'll go. Wherever you send me, my bags are already packed. If you say, charge the enemy position on that hill, I'm going to be first up there. I am all in, Jesus.'

The man's a romantic idealist, isn't he? He's full of zeal. He's grasped something of what Jesus is about and he's all for it. Jesus' program is one he can sign up to. He's like any young person who in their idealism and romanticism gets hold of an idea and now won't hear of anything else.

But Jesus isn't a romantic, he's a realist. He knows the cost of following him. The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

The Son of Man is the glorious man Daniel saw in Daniel 7, the One to whom all dominion and power and glory are given, the One whose kingdom will never end. And it was Jesus' favourite title for himself. And yet, since his incarnation, the Son of Man has had no where to lay his head. He's an alien, a foreigner, a man on the road, in the world he created.

And the reason he's nowhere to call home is that the *powers-that-be,* the religious and secular powers of the day, want to kill him. He's like a hunted man, constantly on the move. And the reason he's on the road now is that he's heading to Jerusalem, to be crucified by those same powers, by the City of Man.

So Jesus is saying to this romantic idealist, to this enthusiast, are you ready for the suffering and rejection and opposition that comes with following me?

You see, to follow Jesus, to live as a Christian, inevitably puts you at odds with the world. To be a citizen of the kingdom means you've changed your primary allegience. And just like Jesus, you're going to be an alien, a foreigner in, and to, the world. Your values, your priorities, the decisions you take in life, the positions you hold in life, may put you at odds with friends and colleagues. So you may not get the positions you want. Your career may not progress the way you want. And that means you've got to be willing to give up the comfortable life that others might pursue; you've got to be willing to give up your reputation or the identity that comes with the approval of others.

Sinclair Ferguson, the Scottish pastor and theologian, says, 'it's impossible to be a true Christian *without* saying to Jesus 'I will follow you wherever you go'. But then he says that to that, Jesus replies, 'but will you?' Are you really willing to give up the pursuit of comfort or lose the approval of the crowd for my sake? Are you willing to follow me out of that wrong relationship? Are you willing to follow me even if it means your family and friends think you're weird or, worse, objectionable? Are you willing to stand apart from and opposed to the world, with all the

counterattacks you'll face, and share in the suffering and rejection of the one who suffered and was rejected for you?

You see, the Christian life is not for the romantic idealist. Think becoming and being a Christian is the passport to your best life now and you're going to be disillusioned.

Instead, a follower of Jesus understands the 'now and not-yet' of his kingdom. They understand that in Christ the kingdom of God has broken into the world, but not fully, not as it will at the end of time. So the true disciple knows that you don't reign in life now, but one day you will; you know you don't walk on roads paved with gold now, but one day you will. You know you don't physically gaze upon the king now; but one day you will. You know you don't live in the full and never-ending *shalom* of the kingdom now, but one day you will. Those things are only partial now, and with them comes opposition and rejection, for the sake of the one rejected for you. And the true disciple understand that and embraces that.

So as you look at this first man, ask yourself, 'Am I willing to follow Christ wherever he goes, wherever he leads me?' And if not, why not? What won't you give up for him?

Because if the first man was a romantic, the second and the third were willing to follow on one condition.

The King
Look at v59-60, 'To another [Jesus] said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."'

Now, it's not clear what this man's situation was. Maybe his Dad's already died, and he's asking to hold off on following Jesus until after he's organised the funeral. Or maybe he's concerned that his father won't approve of him carrying on with this travelling rabbi guy, so he's asking to hold off until his dad's died and then he'll follow.

Either way, Jesus' response drives home his claim upon our lives, doesn't it?

Because, if his dad has already died and is awaiting burial, Jesus is saying, even that, even one of the most sacrosanct, sacred things you can do - bury your loved one, even one of the things society expects of you, must take second place to him.

You see, for this man to leave his father, not some distant relative, not some passing acquaintance, but his father of all people, unburied, would have been scandalous. To say, 'something, someone, matters more to me than my father's funeral', would have exposed him to the rebuke and contempt, the censure of his community. And Jesus is saying, 'you've got be willing to endure that if you want to follow me. To follow me, to obey me, must rank higher in your list of priorities than social conventions, or expectation; higher than what your family and friends think of you.

But several commentators argue that this man's father can't have died yet, because if he had, his son would hardly be out on the street. He'd be at home, mourning and already preparing the funeral. So if he hasn't died, what's this man saying? He's saying, Jesus, I want to follow you, I want to be your

disciple, but not just yet. Once my dad's died, once I've buried him, then I'll follow you. I want to follow you, just not yet.

And Jesus' response tells us, that even the best excuse is no excuse for delaying following him or obeying him. Even the best excuse is no excuse to having him take the number one place in your life, the one who orders all your other priorities. 'I just need to get through this period at work, then I'll get serious about my faith.' 'I just need to sort this other stuff and then I'll investigate Christianity.' 'I just need to take some time out and then I'll consider addressing this area in my life.' But if Jesus rejects this man's excuse he rejects every excuse.

Verse 60 again, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead." It's Jesus diagnosis of the condition of those who refuse to follow him, who say, 'maybe one day', it's like you're dead, spiritually dead - the life of God just isn't flowing through your veins. But even for those who are Christians, put something else above him, relegate his word to second place in your life, delay your obedience, and it's deathly. Because anything you want, or love, or serve more than Christ will inevitably bring a deadness into your heart. Anything you prioritise over Jesus, that's going to be your king, whether it's some relationship or your job; whether it's your family, or your image. And as it's rule, it's hold extends in your life, it'll cast a shadow over your heart. It'll be like some industrial chemical leaking out of a decaying, dying factory, seeping into a river and poisoning it. Nothing will grow there.

And Jesus is saying to this man, and to us, 'That's not the kind of life I'm calling you to. Instead, follow me and go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' The kingdom that will right all wrongs and heal all hurts, and the kingdom that brings life instead of death. Because to be a follower of Christ *is* to proclaim the kingdom. It's to declare to the world, to your friends and colleagues, there is another King. And is so much better than all the other minor kings that seek to dominate our lives.

And that king demands our unconditional commitment. And it's only through unconditional commitment that you'll know and experience the life and the power of the kingdom flowing through you.

You see, look at the third man Jesus encounters on the road. Verses 61-62: 'Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

So this man is also making a conditional offer to follow Jesus, isn't he. He'll follow Jesus, but there's something he wants to do first. I'll follow you, Jesus, but first… . And Jesus sees it for what it is, an excuse for delay.

Just ask yourself, is there any area where you're delaying in obedience to Christ? Where you know what he calls you to, but you're putting it off. I will do it Lord, but first…

George Whitefield, the great 18th Century evangelist, prayed, "God, give me a deep humility, a well-guided zeal, a burning love and a single eye, and then let man and devils do their worst!" He knew that Christ's call upon us is one of uncompromising singlemindedness. That you cannot follow Christ, let alone serve him, with a divided heart.

You see, why does a farmer plough his field? And why does he plough straight furrows? He ploughs for a harvest, and he ploughs straight to maximise his harvest. And apparently, if you're hand ploughing a field and you keep looking backwards, you'll never plough straight. If you're constantly distracted by the fun the people back in the village seem to be having, or what you're friends are up to in the neighbouring field, you'll never plough straight. To plough straight you've got to keep looking straight ahead at your fixed point, your reference point, or else you're going to be all over the place.

And the only way to enjoy the harvest of the kingdom, the only way to enjoy the fullness of the kingdom, to experience all that Christ has for you, and maximise your joy, is unconditional commitment to Christ.

It's to have him as your fixed point, your compass. And discipleship is not a one-off commitment, made in the past, in the emotion of a moment. That's like thinking ploughing a field is done just by getting the plough out of the barn and leaving it there. To be a disciple, to be a Christian, is a lifetime of getting up in the morning and deciding I'm following Christ. He's the one I'm fixing my eyes on. Doesn't matter how anyone else is living. Doesn't matter what anyone else is doing. Doesn't matter what the world says is acceptable or unacceptable. He's the One I'm following in the road.

What can give you the desire to do that? By seeing Christ, the King, walking with his face set to Jerusalem, walking the road to the cross, for you. That's how much he loves you. Then get into the road of faith and love and follow him.