

**A sermon preached on the 2nd Sunday after Trinity 2019 at St Andrew's Church, Soham,
by the Revd Eleanor Whalley, Vicar. 1 Kings 19: 15 & 16, 19-21; Luke 9: 51-62**

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Breaking with tradition,

And at the risk of causing upset,

I want to make mention of politics.

I turned on the radio on Friday morning,

hoping to catch the 8 o'clock news.

On the Today programme,

Nick Robinson was interviewing Jess Phillips,

one of the Labour MPs who, last week,

signed the statement sent to Jeremy Corbyn,

asking that the whip be removed from Chris Williamson,

following his readmission to the Labour Party.

At the end of the interview, after a discussion about the allegations of anti-semitism within the Labour Party,

Jess Phillips talked about Labour more generally.

'The Labour Party, 'she said, 'has lost its metal... It seems that we've got no backbone to just make decisions, stick to them, get people to believe in what we're saying and carry on... We've got to start moving quickly on things rather than just slowly dragging, and talking about process for ever and ever'.

That criticism, many would say – many might observe – could equally well be applied

to all of the mainstream political parties in Britain today;

it could, perhaps, also be applied to many of our national institutions:

'It seems that we've got no backbone to just make decisions, stick to them, get people to believe in what we are saying and carry on.'

Is that true of the Church of England today?

I wonder...

The Gospel reading we've just heard

marks a turning point in Luke's Gospel.

Luke's is a Gospel of two unequal halves.

Luke chapter 9 verse 51 – the verse we began with today – marks the beginning of the second half.

If Jesus demonstrates nothing else in Luke's Gospel,

Jesus demonstrates backbone.

At the beginning of the second half - Luke chapter 9, verse 51 - Jesus 'sets his face to go to Jerusalem'.

That phrase echoes a phrase in Isaiah –

a phrase with which Jesus would have been familiar.

He would have read it himself - and heard it read - in the synagogue.

The Suffering Servant in Isaiah proclaims:

'The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward... I did not hide my face from insult and spitting... I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame'.

In the world's terms, of course, Jesus will be put to shame:

in Jerusalem, as he very well knows,

Jesus will be flogged, stripped naked, nailed to a cross and left to die.

But from an eternal perspective, Jesus has the victory,

a victory won through the power of God,

and won through Jesus' own unflinching resolve.

Jesus has backbone.

and backbone is what he demands of his followers:

'I will follow you. Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home'... 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.': a statement and response from today's Gospel reading.

Look back when you're ploughing,

and the furrow won't be straight.

You'll end up making a mess of things;

you won't achieve your goal.

Some of you will know the truth of that first hand.

Jesus' words may seem impossibly harsh,

but, as Jess Phillips put it,

'[We've] got to start moving quickly on things, rather than just slowly dragging.'

If we are to live according to our principles –

if our principles are to be more than just words -

we've got to put our money where our mouth is.

We've got to stand up and be counted.

As Christians, we've got to set about following Jesus Christ – really following -

and following is not for the faint-hearted.

The business of discipleship, the urgency of proclaiming the Kingdom
leaves little room for half measures.

So how should that play out in our everyday lives?

All of us are called to follow Christ in the world:

'You shall be my witnesses...' says Jesus, 'to the ends of the earth'.

We should live in a way

that points to the One we are following.

People ought to be able to who it is we are following –

we ought to stand out in a crowd.

As I've said, this morning at the cathedral, 9 soon-to-be curates are being ordained Deacon;

yesterday, 12 existing curates were ordained Priest.

However awe-inspiring the call to those ministries,

being a Priest or a Deacon is but one of many ways to respond to Christ's call.

We are all of us called to bear witness to Christ -

called to mimic his radical lifestyle,

called to take up his uncompromising stance.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

'Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say "yes, yes" and "no, no" at the same time?
... The Son of God, Jesus Christ... was not "yes and no"; but in him it is always "yes".

So on this day,

as we pray for those newly ordained –

those accepting the call to leadership in Christ's Church – we should pray too for all in authority.

Pray particularly for those who call themselves Christians.

We should pray for our Queen, and for our Government;

we should pray for all political leaders, locally, nationally and internationally;

for our Councillors in this town and in this District;

pray for Members of Parliament, and for the members of the European Council -

pray that God gives them wisdom to discern what is right,

and pray they find the courage to stand up for it, whatever the personal cost;

pray they might play their part in setting the face of our nation towards the light.

At the start of this year, the Church of England recently released a Prayer for the Nation, and I'm going to end with that:

God of hope,
in these times of change, unite our nation and guide our leaders with your wisdom.
Give us courage to overcome our fears, and help us to build a future
in which all may prosper and share;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**