

**Fit for the Kingdom**

*II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Luke 9:51-62*

At the turning point of C. S. Lewis' beloved, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, several characters encourage each other with reports that Aslan, the true ruler of oppressed Narnia, has reappeared to fight the evil witch. Their words of encouragement to each other are as potent as they are succinct: "Aslan is on the move."<sup>i</sup>

Abraham Lincoln, 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, is reported to have said, "I walk slowly, but I never walk backward."<sup>ii</sup> The passage from Luke's Gospel, referred to by some scholars as Luke's travel narrative, shows an aspiration moving towards an intended purpose to travel, to move on towards something. For Jesus it was moving on toward Jerusalem, towards which Jesus sets His face. As He chose to go to Jerusalem, He goes not to end a war or secure the freedom of slaves or banish poverty, but to show people what living by the precepts of God's Kingdom will look like, which, when lived out by God's children then and now, might lead towards the ending of war, the securing of freedom of slaves, and the banishing of poverty amongst so many other things. Jesus is walking towards the realisation of God's Kingdom at work on earth, in all its messiness and incompleteness, but coming nevertheless, and visible now.

It will take time. It will take effort. It will take commitment. It will mean facing highs and lows. It will mean making sacrifices and receiving unexpected gifts. It will mean defeats and successes. But it will mean moving; and in the process of moving, this dynamic discipleship that Jesus calls all His followers to take up, we will discover how close or far the world is, the Church is, and we are to being, 'fit for the Kingdom'.

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem begins with rejection. Rejection by the Samaritan village that won't offer hospitality to Jesus and His disciples. Rejection also, at least in terms of priorities, in the encounters with the three would-be disciples. One seemed determined, until Jesus confronted him with the insecurity and homelessness of life discipleship would mean in his day. In the second case, Jesus took the initiative and sharply responded to excuses about family obligations. The third professed commitment but couples it with a delaying tactic. Speaking to people in His own time, Jesus' words to all three are unambiguous. Discipleship places heavy demands on followers. These stories are specific to His time and to people wanting to become part of Jesus' band of close followers; but they still make us feel uncomfortable, because they ask of us the question about what our own levels of commitment are.

Every Christmas Eve I meet after the services people who are happy to tell me that they are regular attenders, and wouldn't miss the all-age service, or watchnight service. But they're never seen on other occasions. Or what about those who seek to get married in Church and try to come along up until the time of the wedding, but rarely afterwards. Or those having children baptized, who do not follow through with helping their young people grow up within the church family until they can decide for themselves, because their parents don't come either. Oh, but there are Sunday sports, music opportunities, a holiday home, school events. There's Wimbledon, or Murrayfield, or a concert, or a friend in town. And of course, Christianity isn't just about Sunday Church attendance. What about all those promises to commit a fitting proportion of our time, talents, and, whisper it, money. I remember a Jewish friend who, wanting to do the right thing, asked me if his donation to his synagogue should be a tithe based on his gross income or could he get away with basing it on his net income!

I sometimes thank God He called me to be a Minister and a Christian at the same time because without the compulsion, I suspect I might be a pretty rubbish Christian otherwise.

What Jesus is driving at here is not to trivialize situations we face but to bring us up close and personal to the way we set our priorities. He's not offering a blueprint full of commandments about the exact nature of our discipleship and following Him, but making us ask of ourselves, where does my commitment lie? What are my priorities and how do I set them? Perhaps most difficult of all: Am I fit for the Kingdom? Faith can be expressed and experienced in a variety of ways, but there comes a time in each person's journey when it is necessary clearly and unequivocally to declare the depth of that commitment. God's place in our lives is neither a matter of convenience nor something that can be taken for granted or assumed.<sup>iii</sup>

Becoming a follower of Jesus, then or now, is meant to be a life-changing shift in direction and priorities. We're not Jesus, journeying to Jerusalem and death and crucifixion and resurrection afterwards. But we are called, in our own way, to put into practice not only what we believe and why we believe but how we believe in the way we live our lives and set the priorities by which we will live. Are we fit for the Kingdom?

What might that look like for you? Are your relationships with spouses and partners, family members and work colleagues, gracious and supportive, honest and affirming? Do you notice when someone is struggling? Are you being kind? When at work, or volunteering for some good cause, are you giving 100%? Are you imaginative and hopeful and good to work alongside in a team when that is necessary? Are you responsible and resilient and see things through to completion? In the way you handle the resources gifted to you - your time, your talents, your money - are you thoughtful and generous and not waiting to be asked or reminded to help? Are

you the kind of person who looks forward in anticipation and hope, or are you inclined to look backwards and regret and be trapped in and by your past? In your faith, and how you live it, are you open to learn, and question, and wonder, and believe? Not necessarily a university level of theology, but a practical, helpful, sufficient approach to what you believe Jesus wants you to be and to do. Is your faith, like your love, in action? Jesus is asking, are you, am I, fit for the Kingdom?

Determination will be an important characteristic of our discipleship. Jesus maybe sharpens is approach during His earthly ministry because He knows He is not going to be around forever. He wanted to be surrounded by people who can look to the horizon while they are ploughing. In using harsh, direct words Jesus is not trying to drive away followers. He simply refuses to blunt the sharply pointed reality that to share in the work of Jesus means significant commitment. Discipleship is costly, not cozy and comfortable. No distractions, no delays, no turning back. No walking backwards.

Is it hot in here or is it just me? That Jesus, making us all squirm a little, or bristle a little, because He knows what He's saying. Not that we shouldn't have somewhere to live, or shouldn't organize funerals for loved ones, or shouldn't say goodbye to those we may be leaving behind. What He is saying is when doing these things, do they reflect God's Kingdom values, or do we use them as distractions, even if they are big distractions? It's a wonder He has any followers at all. Who could live up to such standards? Like the prophet Elisha following his mentor Elijah. Our attention should not be distracted by the pyrotechnics of the chariot of fire going off into heaven with the old prophet, whatever that is meant to represent. We should focus on Elisha, not feeling worthy enough, and asking for all the help he can get to carry on the work of sharing God's message with God's people. Would God give him what he needed? Would Elisha be fit for the Kingdom? He

picked up Elijah's promised mantle, and crosses over the Jordan and into his work. He confirmed his call through his actions, and his actions were fit for the Kingdom.

When Jesus calls to us, what are we being called to do and to be? What kind of a Christian, given our context today, are we meant to be? It's a risky business. But help comes when we ask, from God, often through others, and sometimes because we realize that, "Yes, I can do this. I might not get it all right, I know I am not perfect, but I am going to be able to do something."

Maybe it's at home. Maybe it's in your workplace. Maybe it's a relationship. Maybe it's something happening at Church. What will it be for politicians, or leaders of industry, or some national establishment. To any, to all, the challenging question is simply, directly, are we 'fit for the Kingdom'? Will we follow Him?

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> David J Lose, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, p191*

<sup>ii</sup> Mitties McDonald Dechamplain, *Feasting on the Gospel, Luke Vol 1, p279*

<sup>iii</sup> Richard J Shaffer Jr, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, p190*