Distractions – finding good excuses not to follow

13 March 2022 – Lent 2

# BIBLE READINGS

## 1 Kings 18 (various verses)

After a long time, in the third year of the drought, the word of the Lord came to Elijah: ‘Go and present yourself to King Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.’ So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. …

When Ahab saw Elijah, he said to him, ‘Is that you, you troubler of Israel?’  
‘I have not made trouble for Israel,’ Elijah replied. ‘But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. … So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the people on Mount Carmel.

Elijah said to the people: ‘Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire – he is God.’

So the prophets of Baal took the bull that was given to them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. ‘Baal, answer us!’ they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. …Midday passed and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered.

Then Elijah … repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. … Then Elijah stepped forward and prayed: ‘Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.  Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.’

Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil … When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, ‘The Lord – he is God! The Lord – he is God!’

## Luke 9:51-62

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, ‘Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them, just as Elijah did?’ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village.

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’

He said to another man, ‘Follow me.’ But he replied, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’

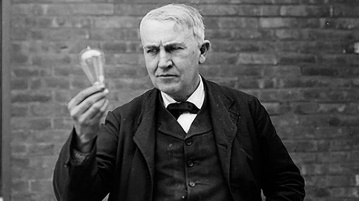
Still another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.’ Jesus replied, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.’

# **MESSAGE** Distractions – finding good excuses not to follow

Some people are remarkably good at focusing a particular task or developing a particular skill while ignoring everything else that is going on around them. It might be a young child learning a musical instrument such as our middle son Dave or perhaps Kathryn or Fred, devoting hours to practice.

Or it might be our next door neighbour practicing their basketball shooting for what seems like hours every day.

Or it might be a gymnast …



… or an inventor such as Thomas Edison in his search to make a working light bulb.

You can probably think of plenty more examples. In each case, the person has both a narrow focus on the skill or problem at hand as well as the resolve to keep going to achieve the desired outcome. What may be less obvious is the sacrifice required by the person - or their parents - to put aside other aspects of life. So for every Olympic swimming champion or AFL football star there are always parents in the background making considerable sacrifices to get a Cate Campbell or a Christian Petracca to their practices and carnivals.

Most of us, though, are not quite so focused. We have interests or hobbies or jobs but they don’t consume our full attention. We pursue our hobbies but don’t let them take over our lives.

At the other extreme, there are the people who get easily distracted from everyday tasks – whether by listening to talkback radio, or by the latest news on Facebook or Instagram or the current soap opera on TV.

A **distraction** is simply a thing, or person or situation that prevents us from concentrating on something else. Distractions can be just a bit of fun – like doing the Wordle puzzle each morning – or can divert our attention from more pressing tasks – like listening to Daniel Andrews’ press conference every day during lockdown to get the latest covid numbers.

Building on our Lent theme of walking with Jesus, our focus today is on **distractions** that prevent us from following Jesus’ call to journey with him.

The context for today’s reading is the pivotal moment in the gospel story where Jesus leaves Galilee behind and in the words of Luke, ‘**sets his face to go to Jerusalem**’. A few events have prompted this change in direction.

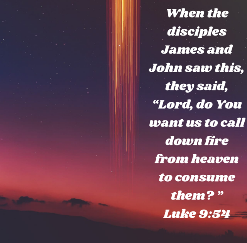
* First was Peter’s realisation and naming of Jesus as **the** **Messiah**, in response to Jesus’ question ‘Who do you say that I am?
* Next was the Transfiguration that we explored a couple of weeks ago where Jesus is seen talking with Moses and Elijah about his ‘departure’ or ‘exodus’ at Jerusalem and the voice from the cloud saying ‘**This is my son. Listen to him.**’
* Third is the sense that as the Messiah, Jesus must present his message to the religious and political leaders in Jerusalem. If he wants to be taken seriously, he can’t remain in the backwater of Galilee forever.

Luke marks this major change in direction by stating that ‘As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven – which sounds like his ascension - Jesus **set his face** to go to Jerusalem.

This is presented as a clear decision that Jesus makes, fully aware that what awaits him in Jerusalem is most likely rejection, suffering and death, which he has twice already warned the disciples about.

The Message translation puts this new phase in Jesus’ ministry this way …

When it came close to the time for his ascension, he gathered up his courage and steeled himself for the journey to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)

In terms of what we said earlier about focus and distractions, it seems as though Jesus puts all distractions aside and focuses all of his attention on the path ahead. In Luke’s Gospel, there are still **ten chapters** before Jesus reaches Jerusalem – mostly filled with teaching – but we need to hear this teaching in terms of Jesus’ single-minded resolve to go to Jerusalem and accept whatever awaits him there.

The first test of this resolve is the lack of welcome that he receives from a village in Samaria. Two of the disciples – James and John – who are known as the sons of thunder – want to call down God’s fiery judgment from heaven on that village, in a similar way that Elijah did in our OT reading and again a few chapters later in 2 Kings chapter 1.

This is similar to the perspective of John the Baptist who expected that as the Messiah Jesus would bring fiery judgment. But this is not the way of Jesus, whose mission is to bring a message of grace and forgiveness and inclusion. So the request of James and John is ignored and the journey continues.

The next test of resolve is directed to those who would **follow** Jesus. And **Wow**! This is **hard teaching**! The sort of teaching we tend to skip over and ignore. The sort of words we wish Jesus had never spoken.

Three people approach Jesus with the intention of following him. Each has reason or excuse to turn back or delay their response.

* The first is told that the way will be **rough**. Will you really follow me if there is no comfortable bed at the end of the day and no welcome from the places I pass through and the people I meet?   
  Will you live with such rejection?
* The second and third people are caught between **family obligations** and **following Jesus**. For one, their father has died and the strong social expectation is to attend to the funeral rites. For the other, they want to say goodbye to their family. Jesus has other priorities. In his mind, announcing God’s kingdom is the first and highest and only priority. Everything else is a distraction. Jesus is asking for complete commitment and resolve. To our ears it sounds harsh and uncompromising.

I suspect that many of us – all of us? – find these words and demands of Jesus to be deeply challenging. Yes, we want to follow Jesus, but we’re not prepared to give up other aspects of our life. **We like our distractions!** … whether it’s meeting family needs, or catching up on Facebook or doing our daily Sudoku or crossword puzzle.

But here’s the thing. Jesus is fully oriented towards God’s purposes, even when these involve suffering and rejection. He has a narrow, single-minded focus and resolve. And he asks his followers to have a similar focus and resolve. The demands of following Jesus are tough and hard indeed – they require us to take up our cross and follow.

If we **choose** to follow Jesus, there is no guarantee of **welcome** or **hospitality** from others. Unlike us who are heavily attached to our church buildings and the homes we live in, Jesus claims he has no such place to lay his head. He will travel light and go where God directs.

Even the role of family and family expectations are blurred. For Jesus, all his followers are like one big family – we’re to treat each other like a brother or sister. Our flesh-and-blood families have no greater claim than our Christian brothers and sisters.

And for Jesus, the only way is forward, towards Jerusalem. He warns us not to look back and regret what we’re leaving behind, not to get distracted by other demands. With Jesus, discipleship requires **100%** of our focus and commitment.

I want to leave some space for us to ponder what all this may mean for us as individuals and as faith communities. But before I do, I just wonder what might happen if we did choose to lay aside some of our many distractions and focus our attention as fully as possible on building God’s kingdom in our midst. How might our priorities change?   
What risks might we be prepared to take?   
What might we achieve together?

Let’s take a minute or two now to consider Jesus’ call to lay aside our distractions …