

## 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

*“No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

Luke 9, 51-62

*“It is absolutely clear that God has called you to be free.”*

Galatians 5,13

Today's gospel reading is a direct and unambiguous comment by Jesus about human inconsistency and procrastination. It possibly irks many of us because Jesus' statement: "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." was often wrongly thought to be a statement of infidelity to one's life commitments.

Jesus is simply using strong and colourful language to point out that following him and living out his message is not something that we can just dabble in. It's not like making a decision to try pilates or aerobics for a while in order to improve our fitness level. Or it's not like installing solar power in our house as a gesture to living sustainably, or signing a petition to ban commercial whaling. We might be sincere about such actions but hardly be regarded as serious if they are one-off actions and don't develop into integrated and consistent habits for living.

While Jesus clearly challenges his listeners about their propensity to renege on decisions they have made, the wider context in which he makes his utterance points to the fact that what he says is open to interpretation. He is using figurative language to talk about the quality of our commitment to him. This becomes clearer when we hear the disciples' proposal of vengeance against the Samaritans for their apparent lack of hospitality. The reaction of Jesus to the disciples' hastiness in wanting to mete out disproportionate punishment is to tell them very clearly that there is good reason to excuse the Samaritans for their boorishness and there is no point in having them struck down by lightning.

How is it, then, that Jesus seems to have one attitude towards his disciples and those who protest that they will follow him once they have attended to "important" business, and a different one to the Samaritans? (A people despised by the Jews because they had broken away from mainstream Judaism. In Hebrew, the literal meaning of Samaritans is "Keepers of the Law") I would suggest that a clue to the answer is to be found in today's second reading from Galatians where Paul writes about what it means to be free. According to Paul, once a person comes to experience God as the essence of goodness and love, he or she has found true freedom and cannot revert to living in fear or bargaining with God. Through their association with Jesus, the disciples have come to experience God's boundless love and God's dream for the whole of humanity. In rebuking the disciples, Jesus is pointing out to them that there are excuses for the Samaritans because they don't know any better, whereas they (the disciples) should really have known better and responded accordingly.

Jesus demands from those of us who would declare ourselves as his disciples a commitment that is clear, unwavering and unambiguous. Personal security and comfort take second place when it comes to working to realise God's dream of a world in which justice, reconciliation

and peace are lived realities. Being faithful, authentic disciples of Jesus and credible proclaimers of his Gospel mean always going forward and not looking back with regrets and doubts and second thoughts. In the course of history there have been many whose dedication to what is right has been an inspiration to the rest of us. One of those is King Christian of Denmark.

We all know that, while the Nazis succeeded in occupying Denmark during World War II, they did not succeed in controlling it. When they issued an edict that all Jews in the country were to wear a yellow star, King Christian responded by saying that he, too, would wear one and would consider it a badge of honour. The yellow star was not introduced. Then the Nazis directed the Danish government to establish a Jewish ghetto. The King intervened and said that, if a ghetto were established, he and his family would vacate the palace and move in with the Jews. There was no Jewish ghetto, but the Nazi response was to ban the flying of the Danish flag. The king defied them and flew the flag from the palace. The Nazis sent a message to say that a German soldier was on his way to take the flag down. King Christian responded by saying that a Danish soldier would raise it again. The Nazis threatened to shoot any Danish soldier who tried to raise it again. Christian sent a message back to say that he would be the soldier. The flag continued to fly. The Nazis then devised a secret plan to arrest all Danish Jews on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1943 (Jewish New Year). They had four ships waiting just off the coast to transport the Jews to concentration camps in other parts of Europe. The Danish government got wind of what was happening and alerted all the people. Throughout the entire country, resistance groups sprang into action and set about smuggling Jews across the two mile channel that separated Denmark from Sweden. Danish Christian churches were asked to collect from synagogues Torahs and other precious items and put them in safe keeping. The King proclaimed that, if any Jewish family needed money to escape, any Danish citizen assisting them only had to go to any bank and make a request for 5000 or 10,000 kroner, quietly stating the reason for the request. The money was promptly handed over, and no questions asked. It is extraordinary that there is no record of any Danish citizen taking advantage of the scheme for personal gain. King Christian's stand inspired a whole nation to respond as one to protect Denmark's Jewish community. Through non-violent action such as this, 7000 Jews were saved from concentration camps and almost certain extinction. When those same Jews returned home at the end of the war, they discovered that their homes, their pets and gardens and their personal belongings had been carefully looked after by neighbours. What King Christian and the Danish people did might not look particularly religious, but it speaks volumes about the Gospel. (A full account of Denmark's non-violent response to Nazi aggression can be found in Philip Friedman's *Their Brothers' Keeper* and in an article by Ron Sider and Richard Taylor entitled: "International Aggression and Nonmilitary Defense".)