

Every so often as we read the Gospels, as we read the teaching Jesus, we come across passages where I certainly find myself saying, ‘Hmm, that is a bit harsh.’ The Gospel passage appointed or today would fall into that category as Jesus seems to dismiss those potential followers who say to him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ ‘but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ This seems to fly in the face of compassion, of loyalty to family. So what are we to make of this?

I suppose we can begin by thinking in terms of reluctance to make a first step, that initial commitment. When I began to think along those lines my mind went back to that initial prayer of St Augustine. St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, born in North Africa in 354 AD. Augustine was a giant of the early Church but he was very definitely a saint with a past. The son of devout Christian parents, to the distress of his mother, he led a very dissolute early life and his path to faith was certainly not an easy one. In his book, ‘Confessions’, he talks of that crucial time he wrestled with faith and the implications that would have for his life style. He wrote

But I, miserable young man, supremely miserable even at the outset of my youth, had entreated chastity of you, and said, Grant me chastity... but not yet. For I was afraid lest you should hear me soon, and soon deliver me from the disease of concupiscence, which I desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished. *Confessions 13:7:17*

which has often been paraphrased, ‘Lord make me pure – but not yet.’ He wanted to embrace the Christian life but there was something still holding him back.

So what we are talking about here is taking that first step. This isn’t something that is exclusively religious. We come across this in all areas of life as we ask

ourselves ‘Will we? Won’t we?’ It can be on the mundane level of getting motivated to start that job we should have started ages ago – clearing out the attic, tidying up the spare room, starting to get back into a fitness routine, starting that diet – there are lots of reasons why we should and lots of excuses for why we don’t. We’ll get round to it eventually, sometime or another.

When we do there is that sense of relief and we ask ourselves why we didn’t do it ages ago. I suppose there is that nagging question, will I be able to keep it up, what if it doesn’t work out. There can be something of that in our own Christian pilgrimage. We can be so conscious of the times we fall short, the times we fall at the old familiar hurdles, we lose our temper, we succumb to temptation, we are conscious of a sense of failure, of our own weakness – we feel like giving it up, just throwing in the towel. But this is to forget a fundamental Christian truth – we were never meant to do this on our own, in our own strength.

In his Christmas broadcast at the start of the last War George 6<sup>th</sup> quoted from the poem by Minnie Louise Haskins

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:  
“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”  
And he replied:  
“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.  
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”  
So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.  
And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

*From ‘God knows’ Minnie Louise Haskins*

The God who calls us, empowers us and walks the way with us. Paul explores this whole idea of God walking alongside us, working in and through us by his

Holy Spirit in the portion we read from his letter to the Galatians. He encourages us, ‘Live by the Spirit ‘ (v 16) We would also translate the word Paul uses as ‘walk with, accompany’. So I rather like the way the translation ‘The Message’ puts this text:

<sup>16</sup>My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit.

Then at the end of our portion we are encouraged to allow ourselves to ‘be guided by the Spirit’ (v 25) The word that we have translated as guided has connections with military formation, of a group of soldiers marching in a row, keeping in step with their leader. So we have ‘be guided by the Spirit’, ‘Keep in step with the Spirit.’.

So, knowing that we are not alone, confident of God’s presence, keeping in step with the Spirit, animated and motivated by the Spirit, we embark on our journey of faith. Yes we may fail at times, we may be confused even hurt, but God is there ready to forgive, to strengthen, to heal.

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