Sunday 26th June

Luke 9:51-62

I felt stumped when I read this week’s gospel. Where would it lead me? As I have heard from some who have approached an Ignatian way of praying; there seem so few words to explore.

The commentators I read highlighted predictable themes. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. We know that this means that the events that will lead to his death are in-train. He will not be deterred from his purpose.

Another theme is Jesus’ strong sense of mercy. After he is rejected by the Samaritan people the disciples ask; “Lord do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and wipe them out?” Jesus rebukes this proposed violence. So, there are themes here that relate to radical commitment to God.

The work of this gospel in our context today is to reflect on commitment; both yours and mine. I began musing on what this parish and desires in the next incumbent. Do you expect a new priest to come and create a new future? So I ask; what is it that you are willing to invest in? What part will you play in birthing something new? You see, looking to what you have known in the past won’t steer you to a new future. Yes, the young man with a family might be your ideal but no one priest can bring all that you need for a dynamic future. That future can only grow out of personal flourishing in each of you.

So my sermon writing this week began with a problem. How do I encourage people to examine their personal commitment? God led me to a book I hadn’t had put aside for lack of time. It is titled *Leading With The Sermon.* Willimon addressing himself to preachers he says “what God means to do among us is more, so much more than the production of a well-functioning organization. Further that Salvation through Jesus necessitates someone accepting Christ’s yoke of leadership. In spite of the difficulties and dangers of leadership in Jesus’ name, it is wonderful to behold the word of God faithfully spoken, the Holy Spirit ripping the sermon out of our hands and we get a front-row seat to watch the body of Christ set in motion.

Can you look honestly at what is happening in you, and what in happening in this place? Are your faces squarely set towards the Kingdom and what are you prepared to allow your next priest make you feel uncomfortable?

Willimon’s basic premise is that Jesus Christ keeps leadership difficult. p25 That is because the Gospel is basically challenging. What Christian communities need to hear may not suit them! He says to priests “intestinal fortitude is required to preach provocative Jesus”. This is what Luther said to preachers of his day. Do not be “silent or humble but testify without being frightened or bashful…speak out candidly without regard for sparing anyone, let it strike whomever or whatever it will. It is a great hinderance to a preacher to look around and worry about what people like or do not like to hear. Gospel preaching on Sunday requires finding a way to talk about matters the congregation has excluded from conversation all week.” p27

Willimon states “conversion, transformation and renovation are what the redemptive Jesus does to people and their churches. However, there is a big but; transformation and renovation don’t come without cost. Change is difficult and perhaps we in the church are the last to want things to be different” p28. Perhaps an important question is what most needs to happen in our church? p29 And perhaps an even more provocative question is what needs to happen in me?

So I have a provocative question for you. How much did faith development stretched you in the last year? Your previous vicar told me that the people of St Margarets don’t attend theological offerings. I have to agree. It is a handful of people and perhaps the same people attend Advent and Lenten and other studies. What objective conclusion can be drawn from this state of affairs?

Willimon profiles his work in a particular US church that is need of growth. It’s situation was the same as here. An aging population and no renewal through young families and we now have the added disruption of Covid. He concluded that he would work differently in order to lead the parish’s priorities. He noted he needrd to up-skill and become the leader he had not previously known how to be. He then moves into a long dissertation on how church leaders are not always across secular leadership management trends which he claims are critical.

This is where I want to part company with what I see as hard-sell evangelism. It isn’t for me. When I was first ordained there was a push to this kind of leadership in post-ordination training and I am sure it has its place in some churches.

Despite my misgivings, Willimon does raise critical questions. He decides to employ and evangelist and then change himself. Tall order!

Now I know that you will want a new priest who will foster Children’s Ministry. I’am going to tell you something for nothing. The old days of Sunday School are dead! Children have changed, families have changed, and the world has changed. Effective Children’s Ministry is probably the most sought after commodity across the whole diocese. How much change are you willing to undergo in order to make this a reality?

It is probably only evangelical churches that are seeing significant growth in this area. Perhaps this afternoon you can ask Tim the secret to his healthy children’s ministry. I wonder if some of you are willing to go on fact-finding missions to explore how this ministry is created and sustained.

Willimon’s point is that no leader read (your new priest) comes with the skills necessary to create a new future. Remembering that no human gathering survives or thrives without continual transformation, refitting and repositioning particularly an institution that is accountable to a living God. p32

Willimon claims that Spirit-induced peaching and leadership inevitably produces discomfort in the people and in the leader. p 32 He is provocative when he suggests a community needs to face discomfort that comes from the discrepancy between the way things are and the way that they could be. p33

Leader induced pain is a necessary unavoidable prelude, to the possibility of the achievement of something better in the conviction that God really wants us to succeed at this work. False hopes, and easy answers are unfaithful attempts to have a future on our own: work more feverishly at what we did in the past, do what we have always done, and perhaps we can fashion a future without having to ask God for help. p33.

I leave Willimon’s views here and go back to the question that I introduced to you some weeks back. Is the person you are seeking weak enough to rest in God’s strength while seeking to bring you closer to God? Will you allow that person to make you feel uncomfortable without being resentful?

Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem knowing the path ahead would be challenging. Your path ahead is challenging but full of Spirit-filled hope. What are you going to do about it?

Reference

Willimon, W. H *Leading With The Sermon Preaching as Leadership* Fortress Press Minneapolis 2020