

WHEN THE DAYS DREW NEAR FOR HIM TO BE TAKEN UP, HE SET HIS FACE TO GO TO JERUSALEM.

I know this may well sound strange to you, but please remember I was raised way out west where we had both kinds of music: country **and** western. Every time I read the verses of our Gospel, I keep hearing in the back of my mind the lyrics of the Lynn Anderson epic classic, "I beg your pardon. I never promised you a rose garden."

Look at our text. In our lesson, we meet 3-would be followers of Jesus. Sadly, not one is fit for the kingdom of God, because each allows something to stand in the way of following Christ; each wants to follow Christ, but on their terms. To paraphrase Lynn Anderson, JESUS CALLS US TO FOLLOW HIM, BUT HE NEVER PROMISES US A ROSE GARDEN.

As Jesus and the disciples journey to Jerusalem, they meet a man who says to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." Sounds good and impressive. But, Jesus, who knows all things, knew that this was only a statement of emotion and sentiment.

In fact, the man uses the future tense. What he means is that he does not want to follow Jesus now, today, but that he will follow Jesus later on, when he decides it is a good time. In other words, he wants to follow Jesus on his terms; when he decides it is a good time for him.

The follower of Jesus must be willing to follow exactly in the footsteps of Jesus. Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." He carried a cross. He had less than foxes and the birds of the air. In His earthly life, Jesus lost

everything. All that He had was the cross. Following Jesus, means that we must be willing to have only what He had.

The second man we meet in our lesson did not come to Jesus, Jesus went to him. The words of Jesus were short and sweet and to the point, "Follow Me." "Follow Me, now" is not in the future tense, "Follow me when you have time; when it is convenient for you."

Like the first man, this man also wanted to follow Jesus on his terms, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father". Jesus sternly rebukes him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God". Those are harsh words! And, they are meant to be. These are words are law, to show the man his sin. In the days of Jesus, the dead were buried immediately. So, it is obvious that this man's father was not dead, or even on his death bed. This man was looking for any excuse that he could not to follow Jesus.

We must understand the words of Jesus correctly. The point that Jesus is making is that anyone could bury the dead. But, for now, today, people must hear the Gospel so that they come to faith and are saved, so we Christians, as God's ambassadors, must share with all people the good news of the Gospel.

Like the first man, this man wanted to follow Jesus on his terms. He had other priorities than taking up His cross and following Christ at this point in his life.

And, we meet one more man who also volunteered to follow Jesus, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home". Once again, we see a would-be follower of Jesus who allowed earthly priorities to stand in the way of following Christ. Again, to understand his words correctly, what he is really saying to Jesus is, "I'll follow you Lord, but

first, You must wait for me to say goodbye to my family." Like the two other men, he is dictating the terms and conditions under which and when he will follow Jesus.

Jesus points out His sin by teaching him the truth that any farmer would readily understand, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God". When you are plowing, you cannot look behind, where you have been, you must ever look forward to where you want that plow to go, or you will be out of the furrow.

"Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh," Paul writes in our Epistle. "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh". In other words, you cannot follow Christ and, at the same time, live to gratify the desires of the flesh.

We want to follow Christ, but like the men in our lesson, we insist on doing it on our terms, when it is convenient for us. We want to follow Jesus and hate our neighbor; keep a record of my neighbor's wrongs; laugh at off-color jokes; hoard our money and buy more and more stuff for ourselves, all the while being filled with the green-eyed monster of jealousy when my neighbor gets a newer and bigger toy than I have.

Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you (Mt 6:33)." But, we do not always seek the kingdom of God first. Like the children of Israel when they looked back to the life of slavery in Egypt and longed for it. They were not looking forward to life in the Promised Land to come, they were looking back. Or, like Lot's wife, after God delivered Lot and his family from Sodom and Gomorrah, looked back and became a pillar of salt.

In order to plow straight furrows, you must look forward and ahead.

So it is to follow Jesus, we must fix our eyes on Jesus.

“He set His face to go to Jerusalem,” the Evangelist writes.

Jerusalem, where the cross and death awaited Him. Nothing could keep Christ from that cross. Not evil King Herod, who slaughtered all boys under the age of 2 in the vain hope of killing the Savior. Not the devil, who, immediately after His baptism, tempted Him in the wilderness to keep Him from the cross. Not even Peter, who after our Lord had taught His disciples of His suffering, death, and resurrection, took Jesus aside and began to correct Him. Not even our Lord’s own fear in the Garden of Gethsamene.

Jesus Christ came to this earth to die for our sins and be raised for our justification. Nothing could keep Jesus from the cross. Yes, the glory of Easter and the ascension came, but only after His suffering and death.

Today, Jesus says to you, “Follow Me”. Luke does not record for us the responses of these 3 would-be disciples in our lesson. There is a good reason for that. The Holy Spirit wants you to hear these words of Jesus to ask yourself whether you respond in faith to Christ’s command to take up your cross and follow Him and persevere on the journey with Jesus.

The Christian life is a journey that parallels Jesus’ journey to death and resurrection in Jerusalem. As Jesus “set His face to go to Jerusalem,” we, baptized and living in Him, steadfastly set our face to go to the New Jerusalem, heaven. That is our home and that is what we live for.

As Jesus faced temptations and oppositions that would turn Him aside from traveling to the cross, we daily face many temptations and oppositions to our traveling under the cross with Christ to our own glorious resurrection and ascension.

The writer of the book of Hebrews describes the Christian life as a “race to be won.” In other words, like a runner striving and straining to win

a race, it is not always going to be easy or fun, but the prize is worth running the race for.

We walk BY FAITH IN JESUS, WHO WALKED THAT ROAD AND WON THE VICTORY FOR US. Which is news of great joy for you, Dear Child of God. You are His disciple not because of what you have done this, that, and the other thing for Jesus; or what you have not done. No, you are a disciple of Jesus because He has made you His disciple. He walked the path for you, and declared His faithfulness and victory, your very own. The real cost of discipleship has been paid for you in full so that you may be His own child and heir.