

## On getting it wrong

St. Brandon's

Luke 9: 51-end

30<sup>th</sup> June 2019

Are you familiar with the BBC TV comedy quiz programme *Have I got news for you?* If so, you'll know the round called 'odd one out' where four pictures are displayed, one of which is the odd one out, and the panellists have to work out which one and why. The connection between the other three is usually not obvious, so working out which one is somehow different is by no means easy.

Well, no pictures – so you'll have to use your imaginations – but which of these is the odd one out: Power Rangers (a team of youth who, when 'morphed', become superheroes with superhuman powers and weapons to match); William Wordsworth (18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> Century romantic poet); Stanley Milgram (20<sup>th</sup> Century American social psychologist); and Andy Williams (an American singer best known for *Moon River*)? A clue? They're all somehow related to our gospel reading this morning.

So, all will / might become clear as we look at that reading. This point in Luke's gospel marks a turning point. Previously, the gospel has concentrated on Jesus' deeds, although it also includes two occasions on which Jesus predicts His death and resurrection (9: 21-22; 9: 44). Now, all of a sudden, the focus is on Jerusalem and what will happen there: "the days drew near for him to be taken up" which implies His passion, death, resurrection and ascension. And it is clear that Jesus is making a deliberate decision – "he set his face to go to Jerusalem" echoing Isaiah 50: 7 which speaks of the suffering servant who "set his face like flint". His mind is made up, He will not be distracted. And it seems at this point that Jesus as it were 'ups the ante'. So the rest of our reading finds Jesus opposing, sometimes apparently quite radically, those who cross Him or His path.

Jesus and His disciples go through Samaria as the most direct route to Jerusalem, and get rejected by a Samaritan village. And James and John suddenly want to act as superheroes, calling down fire from heaven. And Jesus' reaction is basically a long "No...!" In other words, "You've got it so wrong!". Now it would be a bit of a jump from Jesus' rebuke to say that it is not in the nature of God to be violent, but we do begin to glimpse something of that here, and Jesus' non-violent acceptance of His own death does then reinforce it. James and John, as you've probably realised, were precursors to the Power Rangers, seeking to use the superhuman powers they assumed they had violently – and they, like the Power Rangers in Jesus' terms, got it wrong.

So Jesus and His disciples go on their way, not leaving death and destruction in their wake, and come across a man who confidently says, "I will follow you wherever you go". Now you would think that Jesus would welcome this, but instead He in effect warns the man. And His sobering answer drives home the gravity of discipleship, the cost of discipleship. Following Jesus is not a bed of roses – or even "a host of golden daffodils" to quote Wordsworth:

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Aah – a lovely romantic image! And the man seems to have a romantic idea of what following Jesus might mean, and Jesus wants to disabuse him of that. Jesus is thinking of thorns not daffodils, and wants the man to think likewise. The man, in other words, like Wordsworth in his purely romantic moments, had got it wrong.

So what of the next man that they meet on the way to Jerusalem? Well, this is different in that it is Jesus who takes the initiative – "Follow me", He says. But the man seems to have an extremely valid reason for not doing

so yet – “first [in other words, following Jesus would be second] let me go and bury my father”. Now in pretty much any culture this would be a reasonable excuse. In Jewish culture burying a parent was in accord with God’s commandment to “honour your father and mother”. He has a duty to carry out, a commandment to obey, and nothing must get in the way of that.

Now this brings me on to Stanley Milgram who in the 1960s conducted some famous ‘obedience experiments’ while a professor at Yale. A subject walked into a laboratory believing that s/he was about to take part in a study of memory and learning. After being assigned the role of a teacher, the subject was asked to teach word associations to a fellow subject (who in reality was a collaborator of the experimenter). The teaching method, however, was unconventional—administering increasingly higher electric shocks to the learner when they got things wrong. Except that no shocks were actually being administered – but the ‘teachers’ didn’t know that. Once the presumed shock level reached a certain point, the subject was thrown into a conflict. On the one hand, the strapped learner was demanding to be set free, appeared to be suffering pain, and going all the way might have posed a risk to his health. On the other hand, the experimenter, if asked, insisted that the experiment was not as unhealthy as it appeared to be, and that the teacher must go on. In sharp contrast to the expectations of professionals and laymen alike, some 65% of all subjects continued to administer shocks (as they thought), up to the very highest levels.

Stanley Milgram was influenced by the events of the Holocaust, especially the trial of Adolf Eichmann, in developing the experiment. It was Eichmann, you may remember, who claimed at his trial that he was simply following orders in carrying out the crimes against the Jewish people. Milgram’s experiment demonstrated that such “I was only following orders” excuses were much more widespread than we would like to think.

Jesus will not let the man in our gospel story get away with simply obeying the commandment, and while “Let the dead bury their own dead” seems both unrealistic and harsh, the command that follows – “but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” – seeks to re-establish priorities. First, “Follow me”. The man, it seems, like the subjects in Milgram’s experiment, had got his priorities wrong.

So what of the last man that Jesus and His disciples meet? Well, it’s similar to the previous one except that the initiative seems to come from the man himself – “I will follow you, Lord”. But again he wants to go and do something else first. And again, saying farewell to those at home would seem to be a very reasonable request. And Elisha in our OT reading seems to get away with not only kissing his father and mother, but also killing the oxen and throwing a farewell party – though it’s clear that in the process he was very definitely burning his boats (to mix metaphors!).

But that brings me to Andy Williams who, as well as singing *Moon River* sang a song called *Home lovin’ man*:

Deep inside it’s true  
I’m a home lovin’ man  
Comin’ on home to you

(It got to No. 7 in the UK charts in 1970 and was also the title track to a Roger Whittaker album in 1979.)

But again, Jesus is skeptical – if you put your hand to the plough and look back, you won’t plough a straight furrow. If your priorities are really those at home, then you’ve got it wrong. As Jesus had said in the previous chapter of Luke’s gospel, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (8: 21). He seemed to see through the man’s priorities – and the man, like Andy Williams (in Jesus’ terms at least), had got it wrong.

So in each case – James and John, and the three men who meet Jesus and His disciples on the way – they seem to have got it wrong, got their priorities in the wrong order. But just before we think about how this might apply to us, who was the odd one out – Power Rangers, William Wordsworth, Stanley Milgram or Andy

Williams? And the answer is Stanley Milgram because all the others somehow, on Jesus' terms at least, get it wrong, while Stanley Milgram showed how common it is for others to get it wrong.

Now, what about us? Well if you're a woman, you've got it easy because everyone who gets it wrong in our gospel story is a man! Typical, I hear you say! So this clearly doesn't apply to you ....

Do I get it wrong? Do I sometimes wish that God would bring down fire from heaven on certain world leaders, let alone some of the people I work with? Am I complicit in the violence that we are doing to the planet and to people on it? What would it mean to live non-violently in relation to people and planet?

Do I have a romantic view of what following Jesus means and might mean, a child of God enjoying all the benefits of being held in the everlasting arms, assured of my place in heaven, daffodils everywhere? Well yes, but what about the thorns too? What about those who are persecuted for their faith? How do I stand with them? How do I resist all that chokes life out of those for whom this world is not a host of golden daffodils?

Do I have a legalistic approach to following the rules, doing my duty, being obedient to the way the world is ordered around me? Or is my first priority following Jesus whatever that might mean, wherever that might take me?

And, while being a home lovin' man, have I ordered my priorities correctly and, like Jesus, set my face like flint to go to Jerusalem with my Lord?

I get it wrong a lot of the time. Maybe you do too. I need to be led by the Holy Spirit, as Paul tells us in our NT reading, if I'm to get it right more often. Maybe you do too. And while that's the subject of another sermon, there's no reason why it shouldn't be the subject and the prayer for our lives in the coming weeks.

So let me, in closing, use part of the post-communion prayer, which we might all say together at the end. Let's pray:

Loving Father, sustain us with your Spirit, that we might serve you here on earth and get it right more of the time. Amen