*The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.*

**Proper 8, Year C**

**Luke 9:51-62**

**The cost of following Jesus**

A young mum and her daughter attended the first three nights of the congregation’s Christmas celebration. Normally the congregation hosted a week-long event of music, entertainment and fun that shares the good news of Jesus’ birth in new and vibrant ways. The local pastor sat down with her on the third night while her daughter played games with the other kids. He thanked her for bringing her family so regularly. She was appreciative of the opportunity to have some fun and she really liked the music… even the children’s Christmas pageant. The pastor invited her to the Christmas Eve worship, offering her the small brochure of the Christmas worship schedule.

She refused. “No thanks,” she said. “We like the fun things, but we are not religious.” The pastor persisted with a smile. She grinned back and said, “No offense, but most of this religious stuff seems to me to be a load of horse you-know-what!” She wasn’t aggressive. She just spoke her heart and then went back to the festivities with her daughter.

The gospel heading today was the “cost of following Jesus.” Was that the issue for this woman?

Or what about this man? He was a farmer and a good one at that. He was a morally and ethically sound person. He would give the shirt off his back and race ahead of you into a burning building to save your kids. He had never been part of a Christian church but wouldn’t begrudge your membership and participation. He wouldn’t belittle your worship or following of Jesus, but wouldn’t join in. He doesn’t see a need. He openly marvels at the hurtful and often foolish things churches and Christians do. He takes life as it comes and complains about life’s hardships a lot less than many of his neighbouring Lutheran farmers.

Know anyone like that?

We struggle just as much today with the issue of following Jesus as the people did when he walked this earth! And I could give you story after story of the confusion and ignorance and indifference that is reflected in people today – just like so many of the responses Jesus experienced during his earthly ministry.

Luke’s Gospel account is concerned about that reality, as it recalls the life and work of Jesus. For the young missionary church of the early centuries, it gave them insights for living in a very difficult and changing environment. No less for us today. God wants us, the continuing mission church in the 21st Century, to learn from this account also.

Today’s sermon text is at the point in Luke’s Gospel where Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem. He is going up to Jerusalem. He sends his messengers ahead of him – people who tell of his coming, people who prepare the way before him. They go to a Samaritan village and are not received. They are turned away. So James and John, two of the disciples, want to burn to cinders these negative, rejecting Samaritans for their unbelief. Not a particularly good response from them either. And Jesus doesn’t support their idea at all. In fact, he tells the two of them in no uncertain terms. So they just continue on their way elsewhere.

Some people come to Jesus and they offer to follow him, they want to be his disciples. At last some progress in mission it seems! But what does Jesus do? He basically sends them away! He throws up a big reality check in front of them. *"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* To another he said, "Follow me." *"Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”* To yet another Jesus said: *"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

When people come and want to follow Jesus – he goes and sends them away! What is going on here?

We could understand it if, at this particular point, the disciples began to ask themselves whether following Jesus was anything like what they had expected or hoped it would be. Is it worth it, if he is so determined to go up to Jerusalem? Is it worth it if no one wants him, if he is just going to go on being rejected? Is it worth it if he is just going to turn prospective followers away?

Perhaps you can understand how they may have felt. Haven’t we been going on for years about mission in our church, and all that seems to be happening is that we are shrinking and getting older and greyer with each passing year? We are still hesitant at welcoming the stranger in our midst. We don’t seem to find it any easier to invite others to the faith. Sometimes we struggle to have a clear vision or understanding about what we are really supposed to be on about, as a Christian church in the community. And on top of that, we are living in a society that is becoming increasingly cynical about the church – more and more people openly state they have no faith, more and more people are turning to alternative faiths, and fewer people are regularly attending church.

What’s the point! This Christian stuff! Is it worth it?

And I am sure that you could add a few personal experiences to this. Many of us have probably had a few moments in life where we have wondered - what’s the point in believing, or trusting so much, or hanging in there so desperately when things just don’t ever seem to work out or get better, or change even a little bit for the good?

How many of you have sat at the bedside of loved ones and prayed and prayed for their recovery – and it has seemed to no avail?

Have you reasoned with a child – a teenager - to change their way of life, or to come back to church, and it hasn’t happened?

Have you prayed for a loved one to come to faith, maybe for years, without any apparent indication that your prayers are being answered?

Maybe you wanted some changes in your own life, some problem you wanted to overcome, some shameful sin you wanted to be rid of, some temptation you just did not want to experience any more. And just when you think you’ve made it, you find you’re back at square one again. You are still stuck with it, just like Paul’s thorn in the flesh that he never seemed to be able to get rid of.

So this Christian stuff, this mission stuff, is it worth it? Why not just leave people alone – let them believe what they want? Just let things be what they will be. Who cares?

But even that does not work for us, does it? Not when you have been touched yourself by the love and grace of Jesus. Something happens to you that you just cannot turn away from.

You’re still a Christian, aren’t you, despite everything you have struggled with in life? In fact sometimes those struggles make us even more convinced and committed than we were before. More than ever, we pray for and hope in and believe in and work for the mission of the church in our day and age and world.

What is it that makes it still worthwhile, and still gives us a heart for telling others, and wanting their lives touched by Jesus as well?

It can only be the One who goes to Jerusalem, and to the cross, and who goes with us still. For out of the Jerusalem experience of Jesus you come to the only faith and conviction that is possible – that this Jesus is not just one of the prophets, another one who was slain by the people of Jerusalem, but this Jesus is no less than the Son of God Himself, who has come to this sin-filled world to show us his love, his acceptance of us, his commitment to walk with us through this world and everything it can throw at us, to finally take us to be with him where he is. He will not let us go! God will not let us go. God will go through everything he has to go through to stay at our side, walk with us, carry us, comfort our hearts, save us and give us hope.

Jesus was God at work in this world, working solely for us fallen beings and our eternal future. If I don’t see that as true, then I deny all faith and belief in God and commit myself to nothing – which in reality means I will be led by every passing whim, as the saying goes, “if you stand for nothing, you’ll fall for anything”. However, if I receive God’s revelation as true, that Jesus is God in the flesh, come down for me and my salvation, then I have no other place to go. My only hope is to follow him and be with him, because where God is – that is the only place that true hope can live.

And that is the only thing that can make the difference. The only thing that makes this Christian stuff worthwhile, the only thing that gives us a reason for mission, the only thing that gives us any reason to hang in there in suffering or rejection or failure or whatever. Because God came in the person of Jesus Christ to be with us – not to turn this world into some kind of paradise – but to be with us in this world, here and now, so that we could be with him in the world to come. And because of Jesus, God will not let anything take us away from him – not rejection or hatred or suffering or loss of family or friends or poverty or homelessness or even death. Nothing will be allowed to take us away from him. Nothing can separate us from Christ and his love!

So we can keep telling others the wonderful good news of how God has come to our rescue through Jesus. We can keep praying for our families, or our suffering loved ones, because God in Jesus is also there for them, and in doing so, we can help them to come to see that and believe it.

When you come to know God through Jesus, when he touches your heart and becomes your God – there is nowhere else you can go or be. And nothing will stop you being there with Him – not family or homelessness, or poverty, or rejection. Your priorities will change. Because God has come to you – in Jesus! Amen

*And may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*