

Nowhere to Rest!

Luke 9:57-62 Nowhere to Rest! As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "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." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Q: Why did the Palestinian cross the road A: We dont know either, but if he wont tell us what he was doing, crossing a road without a permit, we will detain him until we find out! I was looking for a joke with a jarring ending to introduce what I consider to be a particularly jarring Gospel passage -one that comes right out of left field as it were (as the words of Jesus so often do) and takes us by surprise. This jarring passage comes from Luke chapter 9, where Jesus and the Apostolic band seem to be having a bit of a recruitment drive - inviting more people to join their merry band in mission and ministry. One hopeful applicant comes to Jesus and says, I will follow you wherever you go. And Jesus says to him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Jesus then takes the initiative and says to another hopeful looking follower, Follow me. But he says, Lord, first let me go and bury my father - an eminently reasonable request, but one that gets an entirely unsympathetic response from Jesus, Let the dead bury their own dead. As for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God. A third applicant says, I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home. But Jesus says to him, No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. Three people who desired to follow Jesus, three interviews with the boss, three applicants turned away (or so it seems) and most likely also deeply offended. The contrast with our own recruitment drives couldnt be more stark, could it Not that we have many people approaching us and asking whether they might join the church, but when they do, our normal response is not, what have you got to offer On the contrary, were generally ready to try everything short of offering financial incentives to entice potential new members to join us, and if we had more money, we might try that too (a brand new ipod with every new membership [so that new parishioners can download the sermon podcasts and hear them again later, of course]). No were not in a position to incentivise new memberships like that yet, are we, but I must admit that I have stooped to employ that other time-tested technique, of letting slip in a conversation that, you know there are a lot of attractive young women at our church! (well, theres no point in hiding your light under a bushel now, is there) Having said that, I suspect Jesus would not have approved of that approach, and it certainly is not included in the interview technique we witness in Luke 9, where Jesus seems to be doing everything He can to turn people off the idea of joining Him, and this at a time when He could have surely done with a few more staff, for at this stage of His ministry, things were going very well indeed! If you remember our reading from last week, Jesus healed a man with many demons but theres been quite a few things that have happened since then. In a short period, Jesus has healed a haemorrhaging woman, He has raised a young child from the dead, He has miraculously fed more than 5000 people, and he has been transfigured on the mountain top, receiving a bizarre affirmation from God Himself, This is my beloved Son, listen to Him! In human terms, we might say that this is Jesus at the height of Jesus career. This is Muhammad Ali just after hed beaten George Foreman in the Rumble in the Jungle. This is the Beatles when they had multiple hits concurrently in the top 10. This is American President George W. Bush winning his second electoral term (actually, lets not draw any parallels between our Lord Jesus and George Bush). Jesus is riding a wave of popularity. Miracles are pouring out of Him, life-changing words are falling from his lips, God is with Him, and the people love him! And yes its time to pull a few more willing souls on to the team to expand the work of transformation that Jesus and His disciples are undertaking, which is why it comes as such a shock when Jesus says to this hopeful applicant, What do you want to follow me for Im homeless! We take it for granted that Jesus was homeless, but Im sure that this didnt have to be the case. Jesus was at the peak of His career. Did He somehow not see the opportunities for cashing in on his fame After all, there have been any number of other preachers, before and since, who have picked up a packet hawking religion without half the number of miracles to their credit as He had! With more savvy management, they might have all been staying in good hotels as they did the Galilean circuit! I wont mention any names, but I do have a dear friend who was world kickboxing champion at one stage, but even at the height of his career had nothing to show for it! It was dishonest promoters and hopeless management in his case. As happens so often in the fight game, my mate was manipulated and used, and ended up with nothing to show for his remarkable pugilistic career except for a lot of bruises! Was that the case with Jesus - dishonest promoters and bad management kept Jesus and His team impoverished No, it was not, for we know full well that in Jesus case, His poverty was a matter of choice! In our community, success tends to be gauged by the amount of money we make and by the number of possessions we accumulate. If we are going to follow in the path of Jesus, evidently this is not going to be an adequate gauge of our progress. Sometimes I do get in a whingeing mood, I confess, where I say to myself, For the hours I put in and for the expertise I bring to this work I should be getting paid more! Says who, is the obvious reply. Well, says James Packer, says Rene Rifkin (or rather said Rene Rifkin), says any number of the successful, popular people that feature prominently in Who magazine from week to week. Its not relevant for the followers of Jesus though, is it How much you are earning and how many trinkets you have accumulated dont contribute anything to your true stature so far as Jesus is concerned, do they On the contrary, I think it would not be going too far to say that in Jesus estimation, the amount of money you keep in the bank is generally in inverse proportion to your level of success. Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head! Are you sure you want to follow me Jesus walks the path of poverty and homelessness and the important thing to recognise here is that He makes this choice not only for Himself, but for His disciples too. And so he confronts this applicant for discipleship very directly because he needs to realise that if he is going to follow Jesus, losing his earthly security is a fundamental part of the employment contract. Were not told, but Im guessing he didnt take the job. Im guessing that the remuneration package was not what he was looking for. And I dont think either of the two other applicants ended up as disciples either. Jesus certainly didnt give them any encouragement to join Him. On the contrary, He gave each of them good reason to

take their talents elsewhere. Lord, first let me go and bury my father, says the first guy. As I said, an eminently reasonable request, at least on the surface, but we must not assume that the guys father is actually dead. This may be a polite way of saying, First let me fulfil my responsibilities to my parents, after which I will give myself over to working for you. And that is still an entirely legitimate proposal to make, surely. After all, the Bible does teach us to honour your fathers and your mothers, and it wouldnt be right to just leave them to work the farm while you head off gallivanting around the countryside with an itinerant preacher - not after they spent all that money on you to put you through college! I knew a guy who planned his future exactly that way. He told me that he was going to be a missionary as soon as he finished University, but as the time came closer to finishing University, he felt that it was only appropriate that he spend a couple of years working first. After all, he said, his parents had poured all this money into him to put him through Uni. The least he could do was to repay their kindness by putting his education to good purpose. And of course that was 20 years ago, and I dont think the mission field has heard of him since. First let me bury my father, says the man, and its an entirely reasonable proposal, while Jesus response is entirely unreasonable! “Let the dead buy their own dead, He says - a statement that doesnt seem to make sense literally, but which certainly conveys the idea that there are more important things for this young man to do than to wait around for his old man to pass on. The third guy should probably be understood in the same way to the second. “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home. I assume that theres more to this request than a desire to run home and grab a few things for the trip. This guy has things that need to be tied up at home. He has responsibilities and appointments that are going to need to be rescheduled if he is going to allocate time to a missionary enterprise with Jesus. Again, the guy is only being reasonable. He wants to make room for Jesus, but he doesnt want to just abandon his friends, his family and the career he had planned for the sake of what might turn out to be a temporary jaunt! He is ready to fit Jesus in, but naturally only as a part of the bigger picture of where he is going. Hes ready to follow, or, at least hes almost ready. Just give him a week to sort things out, or maybe a month, a couple of months at the most. Jesus says, Anyone who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God! I dont know the actual number of new recruits that Jesus added to His team that day. Not many is my guess. In terms of an employment package, Jesus offered them hardship, poverty, homelessness and loneliness, with no guarantees as to where the journey they were on was going to take them. It was an unreasonable package and Jesus is an unreasonable employer. He expects a lot from His people, with not a great deal of earthly remuneration in return, and He makes no apologies for any of this. Of course, Jesus asks nothing of His followers that He is not willing to do Himself. Even so, couldnt He have been a little less demanding. Couldnt He see that those first century people, just like us, had multiple obligations to friends, family, employers, and to government, and that all these responsibilities were significant and needed to be kept in balance somehow. Couldnt Jesus see that life is just never that simple - that we cant just up and leave and head off around the countryside with him, preaching and driving out demons - not when there are kids at home expecting a meal, not when there are bills to be paid, appointments to be kept, people to meet and business to be done. I mean, who does He think He is to tell us just to drop it all and follow Him. And couldnt Jesus have chosen a more comfortable lifestyle for Himself and for His followers. Why couldnt he have opted for a small home and meagre possessions, rather than none. No. Jesus took the path of poverty and homelessness, and He insisted that His followers take the same path. He insisted that those who follow him be ready to sacrifice security, wealth, family and friends for the sake of their commitment to the Gospel of God. Why couldnt He have been less demanding. You might think Im just engaging in rhetoric in asking these questions, but Im not. In truth, I wonder why the Lord Jesus had to make it so hard. My experience of late has been that indeed the Lord Jesus does take away friends. I havent lost any family or even possessions of late, thanks be to God, but in terms of friends in particular, I have lost friends for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and, OK, I was warned, but frankly, I find it quite debilitating! Why does the Lord do this. Why does He always take us down the narrow path. Why do we have to forsake all for the Kingdom of God. In truth, Im really not sure why, but I think its got something to do with the cross, and I think its got something to do with the connection between love and suffering. This is what I was talking to a friend on her death-bed about last week. Mind you, I didnt realise that she was only a couple of days from death when we were talking about it, but what I said to her is what I say to most people who are grieving a loved one that they have lost - namely, that if you didnt love them it wouldnt hurt. It hurts when we lose someone we love, and it hurts because we love them. Love and pain are never far from each other. You cant have one without the other. We see that in the cross. We see that in the life of Jesus. And we see it here, as Jesus lays down the hard path for His disciples of poverty, loss, loneliness and earthly insecurity, because He knows, and we know, that there is no love without sacrifice,

About the Author

Rev. David B. Smith (the 'Fighting Father') Parish priest, community worker, martial arts master, pro boxer, author, father of three ["fatherdave"](#) [Get a free preview copy of Dave's book, Sex, the Ring & the Eucharist when you sign up for his free newsletter at \[www.fatherdave.org\]\(http://www.fatherdave.org\)](#)

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