

Sermon: St James, Cambridge Trinity 5 30 June 2013

The Reverend Geoffrey Howard

1 Kings 19.15-16,19-end

Ps. 16

Galatians 5.1,13-25

Luke 9.51-end

Ploughing a Straight Furrow

One of the problems of being a Vicar is the Vicarage lawn, or, in my case, lawns. When I retired I sold my large, expensive lawn mower and vowed never to cut a blade of grass ever again. And I haven't. On my visits to Cambridge I would gaze with envy at the velvety College lawns with their immaculate, parallel stripes and ask myself, *Why do my lawns not look like this?* The answer, probably obvious to everyone else, took a long time to dawn on me. I had to stop looking at the grass just in front of the mower and lift my eyes to point on the far edge at which I was aiming. I did so and the appearance of my lawns improved – not dramatically – but noticeably.

So it is with ploughing. To achieve a straight furrow the ploughman needs to fix his eyes on the point he is heading for. We too, our Lord tells us, even those who like me don't know one end of a plough from the other, are engaged in the demanding task of ploughing a straight furrow and in order to succeed we have to keep our eyes fixed ahead on the ultimate goal.

One of the distractions preventing us from ploughing a straight furrow is our fellow ploughmen. This was a lesson Peter had to learn. In his last encounter with the risen Christ he was given a glimpse of the life to which God was calling him. He was to feed God's flock, and his reward would be as painful as that which Jesus himself received. Peter responded by glancing over his shoulder to another disciple, *What about him?* Jesus' reply was, *Mind your own business and get on with your own work.*

I would often ask lapsed churchgoers. *Why don't we see you now?* Often the reason was that someone had upset them, usually the Vicar. The Church, they would exclaim, is full of hypocrites. Like Peter they had let others distract them from their ultimate goal. *Let us run with patience, we read, the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus Jesus alone is the unchanging, never disappointing one.*

Another reason we might look back is regret. It can be crippling to look back on our failures, sins and shortcomings. Only by remembering them in the context of God's forgiveness will we be liberated to face the future.

In my first parish I spent half a day each week in a medical practice counselling troubled people. I didn't advertise the fact that I was a priest, it might have put people off. One day a new receptionist said to a patient coming to see me, *Oh, you are going to see the Vicar.* Something I wasn't pleased about, but which turned out for the best. I saw a young woman in anguish over a relationship which had left her with a chronic infection, she was so guilt-ridden and ashamed that she refused to take the expensive medication she had been prescribed. My task was to try to persuade her to take it. After several fruitless sessions, in

desperation - remember she knew I was a priest - I said to her, *I don't think you need counselling, what you need is confession and absolution.* A few days later she came to my church where she sobbed uncontrollably and gasped out her sorrow, I gave her absolution, she rose to her feet and said calmly, *I won't need to see you again.* And that was the last I saw of her. She had been enabled to discard the past and face the future with renewed hope. God can do that for any of us.

There is also nostalgia, looking back with longing for what we have lost.

This must have been a strong temptation in the early Church. Being a Christian in those days was a costly business. You took your life into your hands. Some of those listening to Jesus had left behind their homes, their families, their work. They must at times have longed for the good things they had had to give up in order to follow him.

To talk of what we have had to give up in this context sounds pathetic. I imagine no-one here has had to make such sacrifices. Nevertheless, any one who takes their faith seriously has had to pay some price. The weekly grind at one of the innumerable tasks to keep the show on the road, year in, year out, can be demoralising. There are times when we would prefer to lie in bed on a Sunday morning or go out for the day, times when a warm fire is very attractive when you have to turn out on a cold night for a PCC meeting.

But possibly the most dangerous temptation of all is to look back and feel we have done our bit, and to rest on our laurels. To let someone else take over. Some of those who had lapsed from the church would often tell me of all the work they had done in the past and my invariable reply was that there is no deposit account in the Kingdom of Heaven, only a current account. Retirement is not in the job description.

A lady whom I visited the other Sunday to give communion to told me that she is part of a housebound group of people who come together their own homes at the same time each week to pray for each other and to pray for us.

Retirement is not part of the job description.

Eddie Cairns, and I were students at Bible College 60 years ago. Eddie is still a Northern Ireland Protestant – puritanical and a fundamentalist. But he is a man saturated in love and joy. He became a missionary, but after a few years had to return home suffering from a crippling neurological condition. In hospital fighting for his life he thought it a wonderful opportunity to testify of his faith to the doctors and nurses attending him.

There is no retirement in God's kingdom.

The Old Testament lesson this morning was concerned with Elisha who, whilst he was ploughing, was called to follow Elijah. To mark his new beginning he broke his plough to pieces and sacrificed his oxen. There will come a time when we too have finished ploughing, I pray that when that moment comes we shall be able at last to look back and see a straight furrow. I especially love the ending of the story where Elijah is taken up to Heaven in a chariot of fire and horses.