

Lections: Acts 9.31-42; John 6.60-69

And now we are ten! A. A. Milne, Winnie the Pooh's creator, also wrote those wonderful books of poems for children, which you may still have on your shelves, including the lovely one which gave the title to one of those books, 'Now we are six'.

*When I was one,  
I had just begun.  
When I was two,  
I was nearly new.  
When I was three,  
I was hardly me.  
When I was four,  
I was not much more.  
When I was five,  
I was just alive.  
But now I am six,  
I'm as clever as clever.  
So I think I'll be six now  
for ever and ever.*

But we are ten, so what does that make us and where are we going? Remember back to when you were ten – for some of us that takes a lot of remembering I know. But achieving double digits, being almost a teenager, one of the big boys, or big girls in the class – it was fantastic. It was a milestone as all birthdays, all celebrations tend to be.

I was on my post-Easter break last week, soaking up the rays alongside a pool in a villa in Andalucía. On the wall of my bedroom, for no good reason, apart from that it was nice, there was a painting of the Pied Piper of Hamlyn, dancing as he played, the rats that'd plagued the city following him, to their inevitable doom. The story, I know, has a very dark side to it as many fairy tales do. But the picture reminded me of a procession, of leading people somewhere, of the roles that you all play.

The analogy, of course, shouldn't be stretched too far, you're not leading those of us behind you to our doom, though I have been in processions that don't seem to know where they're going – not at Southwark Cathedral I hasten to add, and I'm sure not in this lovely cathedral, Mr Dean.

But whether you are crucifers or acolytes or taperers, or thurifers, or the MC, you're in the business of leading people. Often you're leading them in procession, always you're helping to lead them in worship. And always, I hope, you know where you are going.

Jesus was having a bit of a hard time of it. Read the gospels properly, forget the gentle Jesus of our childhood, forget the cuddly Jesus so often presented to us, and what you find is challenge after challenge after challenge. People can only take so much of it and in the gospel reading for this Mass we hear the consequences of all of that.

Jesus' teaching, in which he'd been engaged in the chapters before this particular passage, was inspiring, yes, challenging, yes, but not welcome to all.

*'This teaching is difficult,' they said 'who can accept it?'*

The disciples, those who were following Jesus at the time, just couldn't take it, they had heard enough, thank you very much. As we'd now say, they were pushing back. And Jesus knew that they were offended. To be perfectly honest, if it'd been me my instinct would have been to sweeten the pill, to make it that bit more acceptable, to sense the disagreement and try to do something about it to keep them all on board. But Jesus doesn't do that. Instead he says, in as many words, 'Well if that offended you, what about this?'

It's good that we have these really tough passages in the scriptures. They remind us that following Jesus, being a Christian, is not all sweetness and light, nor is being a member of the church, or a member of a church organisation, or trying to lead a society, of any kind. This is tough stuff because it's real stuff.

As we approach Lambeth 2020 I'm sure that we'll see Archbishop Justin coming under continual pressure to do this, that or the other – we've seen it already in the decision not to invite same sex spouses to the party! People will threaten to leave, or at the very least not come and maybe some will walk away. And this gospel reading is all about that, speaks into that reality.

*'Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.'*

This is real grown up stuff, unbelievable in many ways, people who'd been disciples, who'd been on the journey with Jesus, now gave up, left him to it, turned their back on him and went their own way. And we know, because we've just been celebrating Holy Week, that that kind of reaction would follow Jesus into the garden of his betrayal, into the courtyard of his denial, into the abandonment of his cross. This is tough stuff we're involved in.

But into this tense scene Peter steps with words that get to the heart of the matter.

*'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.'*

There is no one else to follow, there is no one other than Jesus, who gives us life and life in all its fullness. The challenge is real, being in the church is not simple, but I wouldn't follow anyone else, I wouldn't be anywhere else.

Jesus looks at those walking away from him. You can almost here his voice falter, just for a moment

*'Do you also wish to go away?'*

he says to the twelve, who are left there, also watching his supporters drift off. And Peter speaks for them all. No, they're staying, there's no one else to follow.

And so that is why we see others following, people like the wonderful Dorcas in the First Reading, a woman in the town of Joppa who'd been told about Jesus and chose to follow him. And her following was all about simple service, about bringing her God-given talents into her Christian life. And as I hear this reading read I think about those wonderful people who maintain the vestments in our churches and look after the altar linens and do all those necessary but often unnoticed tasks in the sacristy as well as those who are making sure that the guests in our night shelters and the visitors to our food banks have the stuff they need for their daily living.

To be honest there's nothing particularly difficult about carrying a cross or a candle, though carrying it straight seems to be a challenge for some people! But the task may be relatively simple but the message you give is profound; follow, come this way, join the procession, be a disciple, walk with Jesus – and that deeper proclamation that Peter makes – there is no other to follow.

None of this particularly answers my initial question to you all, where is the Company of Servers heading now that we are ten? Or maybe, in a way it does.

We commit ourselves to being disciples and we commit ourselves again to serving God and serving his people in the leadership of worship, pointing always away from ourselves and towards him, who at the altar feeds each one of us for the journey that lies ahead. Not being afraid of the tough decisions, not being afraid of the challenges, we stick with what we know to be right and to being faithful to the calling that was made ten years ago as we chose to be Companions, to bring others closer to the one who is close to us, the one who loves and knows us and feeds us. That is our discipleship, that is our vocation, this is our life.

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