Someone said to Jesus: ‘I will follow you wherever you go’, And Jesus said… ‘Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’.

I’ve just finished reading a biographical novel called *The Salt Path*, by Raynor Winn. It is the story of a couple (Raynor and Moth) in their 50’s who farmed in Wales and through a bad investment and after a lengthy court case lost their home, their livelihood and every penny of savings. This happened in the same week that Moth is given a terminal diagnoses of a brain disease. Having no idea what to do next, and suddenly finding themselves homeless, the couple decide to set off and walk the South West Coastal Path which is a 630 miles long journey around the Devon and Cornish coast at the southern tip of England. All they have is a tent, thin sleeping bags and about £30 a week and so they wild camp in sun, rain and storm.

It’s a classic pilgrim tale with adventures, tales of peculiar people along the way, and it's a journey of endurance, resilience, letting go; and it explores what we understand by home. Is home the four walls where we reside, or is it somewhere else? I wonder what comes to mind when you think of home?

The joy of Cathedral worship is that the congregations are often from all over the world. I imagine many here at the Cathedral are journeying at the moment. Visiting the UK perhaps. Visiting Oxford. Far from home. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus is on a journey. We hear that ‘he set his face to go to Jerusalem’ (Luke 9.51). On his way he meets three would-be followers. ‘I will follow you’, they each say enthusiastically, but they are given a warning.

To the first the warning is of homelessness that I read at the beginning. You follow me, he says, you risk having nowhere to lay your head as well. It’s a striking image. That God Incarnate is essentially homeless, apart from the hospitality of others. What does this
mean then for those who follow him? How should this effect our relationship with material possessions?

To the second the warning is that he is to be willing to turn away from his responsibilities as a dutiful son who wants to bury his father: ‘let the dead bury their own dead’ (Luke 9.60). An odd thing to say. Some theologians think it is more likely that the father isn’t yet dead and he is wanting to follow Jesus after he’s died at some point in the future. Perhaps.

To the third he isn’t even allowed to say goodbye to his home. ‘No-one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’. (Luke 9.62) None of these are easy. They all seem really rather harsh. It seems he’s trying to put them off. It seems he doesn’t actually want followers. It seems as if he’s asking too much. But at the heart of Jesus’ response is a reminder that the call to follow isn’t meant to be easy and there is a cost to it.

Yesterday we hosted the Ordination of 30 new Deacons here at Christ Church. It was a very moving occasion. Each one of them will have responded to God’s call on their lives and in doing so will have weighed up the cost of that, with relation to their homes, their families, themselves. Some will be moving to another part of the country to begin their ministry. I remember the feeling of dislocation and disorientation as we left our home and moved to a new parish. This dislocation can come whenever we are called into something new.

I’m College Chaplain and our students left last week for the long vacation and many left to begin their adult lives after 3 or 4 years of study. Some spoke to me of a sense of rootlessness which is beautifully described by poet John O’Donohue in a poem/blessing ‘Interim Time’:

You are in this time of the interim
Where everything seems withheld.

The path you took to get here has washed out;
The way forward is still concealed from you.

"The old is not old enough to have died away;
The new is still too young to be born."

“As far as you can, hold your confidence.
Do not allow confusion to squander
This call which is loosening
Your roots in false ground,
That you might come free
From all you have outgrown”

‘Free from all you have outgrown’. Jesus’ call to follow him is always a call towards freedom. It is one of the great narrative themes of scripture. In the Hebrew scriptures the Israelites are released from slavery in Egypt into freedom; a freedom that looked very much like wandering in the desert, exile. The disciples of Jesus are called to a journey into the unknown, they are to not look back to the plough but to look forward in faith.

This isn’t of course just about physical place. We’re not all meant to give up our homes and wander the streets! It would be disingenuous when we see the numbers of people struggling on the streets in Oxford and up and down the country to think that literal homelessness is to be desired.

Perhaps it’s more often about being willing and open to the Spirit to move us towards something new; or towards someone who we can help in some way. Or letting go of ways of life or ideas or ways of behaving that might seem to be ways of freedom but actually lead us into a kind of prison (slavery, as the Bible calls it; dependency or reliance as psychology might term it).

St Paul speaks of this in the passage we read from Galatians. ‘For freedom Christ has set us free’ … ‘you were called to freedom brothers and sisters.’ (Galatians 5.1) He lists ways of being to avoid, some of which seem rather unlikely for upstanding citizens such as ourselves (sorcery, licentiousness [not quite sure if I’ve done that or not!], carousing). But others in the list are only too familiar: anger, jealousy, factions: Yes, yes, yes. Freedom from all of this sounds really very attractive doesn’t it? So, Paul tells us, we are called FROM this, and TO something else.

Another list from St Paul. The fruits of the Spirit. And they are rather different: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5.22-23) These are the fruits of the lives of those who belong to Christ and are guided by the Holy Spirit.

But how does a person move from one to the other? How is it possible to loosen the grip on the stuff of our lives that leads to the first list? It’s not easy. In St John’s Gospel Jesus says: Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them’. (John 14.23) ‘We will come to them and
make our home with them’. I wonder whether this is where the change begins? With our own willingness to open ourselves up to the homeless Christ who desires to make His home in us. To lead us into love. Into true freedom.

Jesus’ path is one which leads him to Jerusalem, to betrayal, denial and to his death – the ultimate letting go. And this, brothers and sisters, is the challenge, which some will feel able to accept and others won’t find it possible and will sadly turn away saying it’s too demanding.

But it is a path that leads also to resurrection, to life, to freedom. Freedom from the burdens that weigh us down. Freedom from the fears that prevent us from moving forward. Freedom from those ways of behaviour that lead to misery. Freedom to love and forgive one another. And ultimately freedom even from death itself.

Perhaps it’s good for us to be reminded of this challenge every now and then. To be startled by it. Especially those of us who have been church-goers for many years and our faith is so much a part of who we are that we forget the shock and punch of it.

At the very end of the novel *The Salt Path*, Raynor and Moth meet a man with a tortoise on a lead. It’s a comic moment and particularly odd, but the tortoise is perhaps there as an image of the couple’s journey along the coast path with their homes on their back. I love the image of a tortoise. And I wonder if it’s a rather good image to end on. Are we meant to be rather like tortoises, with our homes with us on our backs?

Wherever we are, whatever is happening in our lives, however far from our physical home, however uncertain of our future path, we carry our true home (Jesus Christ) within us and have an eternal home in the family of God. And that will bring us true freedom.

In the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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