

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 a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Someone once said that people do not voluntarily change until their level of discomfort is greater than their level of fear. The baby-boomers were probably the first generation in Australian history who believed that change was a good thing for its own sake. For most of us, change does not come easily or gently. It is not something that we eagerly embrace; it is forced upon us. We go into it kicking and screaming. We age. Our bodies change. People we know and care about move away. We change jobs and have to learn new skills and face new responsibilities. Our doctor tells us we have to change our eating and exercise habits. Even the changes we seek cause us distress and discomfort.

That new baby we wanted so much keeps us up at night with feedings and worry and continues to do so for the rest of her life, at least the worry part. We finally get to retire and then we find ourselves feeling bored and forgotten. The new easy chair turns out to be less comfortable than the old one. The new computer means I have to learn a lot of stuff that I got along fine without knowing yesterday. Life doesn't ask our permission before it changes, however. If we are going to have authentic and effective lives, we must find a way to deal with the changes that life, and the Gospel, requires of us.

Looking back, we should have known that, sooner or later, an epidemic would come and threaten us. Even a casual glance at history shows that to be the case. Truth be told, we were overdue. We dodged the bullet on the swine flu and the bird flu, SARS and the Hendra virus. Yeah, we should have seen it coming. We should have been prepared. Yet, when the coronavirus did come, it took us by surprise.

Looking back, we probably should have known that the economy couldn't continue to grow the way it was growing, based, as it was, on debt laden mortgages and financial manipulations that most of us couldn't even pronounce, much less understand. Yet, when things went south, it took us by surprise. These tragedies and others all took us by surprise and they have forced changes upon us that have taken us by surprise as well.

I remember when flying on a plane was exciting and fun. 9/11 changed all that, didn't it? Now an airline flight is like a trial by ordeal; it's something you have to endure to get where you want or need to go. And the rules for flying are constantly changing. A year ago, you couldn't take even a nail file on board an airplane. This month the nail file is fine, but you can't get a tube of toothpaste through security. Oh, and now you have to wear a mask. The only way most of us can endure the airline ordeal is to stay focused on the destination. “Yes, this is torture,” we say to ourselves. “But in just a couple of hours I'll be in the Gold Coast, or Fiji, or Bali.

We knew that our parents were getting older, but we weren't quite prepared for them to slow down the way they have and become so dependent upon us. We knew that we were getting older but... well, you know.

No matter how much change we experience, it always takes us by surprise. If we are not careful, the changes that fall upon us can distract us from our destinations — the visions we had of our future and the goals we had set for our lives.

And change is coming at us faster and faster. Look what has happened in just the last forty years: The first personal computer, the IBM 5150 came on the market in 1981. By 2008, there were one billion personal computers in homes around the world and that number doubled in 2015. And most of those computers are capable of doing lots more than we ask of them.

Many of us have gone from playing our parents' 72 rpm long play records to playing our own 45's through vinyl albums, to eight-tracks, to cassettes, to CDs to MP3s to streaming music on our phones. And nobody, you will notice, asked our permission or even our opinion before making these changes. How are we supposed to live with them?

In the Gospel, Luke showed how Jesus refused to be distracted from his calling and his goal. He set his face toward Jerusalem and, despite distractions, refused to be diverted. Change, while inevitable, can also be a distraction, however. It can, if we are not careful, divert us from the work of the kingdom. The Gospel of Jesus Christ reminds us that we are called to be transformed by God's grace and not to settle simply for being changed by the world. We must be constantly on our guard to not confuse the two.

In the first example, Jesus and his disciples were rejected by the Samaritans and his disciples got their feelings hurt and wanted to stop and get some revenge. They wanted to bring down fire and brimstone on these heathens and an astute student of the Bible recognised this as a direct reference to the prophet, Elijah who destroyed some soldiers who scoffed at his calling.

The disciples wanted Jesus to do the same thing to the Samaritans. Show them you are a true prophet of God, they said. Do what Elijah did. Bring down fire to destroy these people. Jesus rebuked them. Elijah's way of doing things was no longer appropriate. We are starting a new order and a new way of being and relating to God and our neighbour, a way based on grace, love, kindness, and generosity. How easy it is to be diverted from the kingdom, especially by the acts of other people, their reactions to us and our reactions to their reactions. We take disagreements personally. We are insulted by anyone who has another view, another idea, another way of doing things.

These days it is rare to hear two people discuss differing points of view without raining fire and brimstone on each other. The well-modulated, rational discussion has become a thing of the past, a cliché, as we bombard each other with verbal fire and brimstone, axioms, sound bites, accusations, and denunciations.

Rabbi and psychologist Edwin Friedman reminded us in his book *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* that, "The first responsibility of a leader," he said, "is to be the non-anxious presence in an anxious system." (1)

The second man who came to Jesus said he wanted to follow Jesus but, first, he had to bury his father. I used to think that this meant that his father was already dead and he just had to go to the funeral. But we know that what the man was saying was that he had an elderly parent that required looking after. As soon as the old man died, however, look out, we're gonna get our discipleship on.

He said that he wanted to follow Jesus, he wanted to be a true disciple, just not right now. He had too many other responsibilities. But later, oh, later he's going to set the world on fire with his devotion.

Later, after the kids have moved out and the dog has died... Later, after mum and dad die or at least move into the nursing home... Later, after I get my retirement all set in stone and paid for... After my wife and I have had a chance to talk... After I've discharged all my responsibilities at the lodge... After, after, after... after everything else is taken care of, then I'll have time to actually become a real disciple of Jesus Christ. But for now, I'll just hang around at the edges, pick up some pointers now and then, write a few cheques, be a basically good and decent person, and that will have to suffice. Let me be clear: There's nothing wrong with being a basically good and decent person. There's nothing wrong with taking care of your elderly parents, your kids, your dog, your retirement. In fact, what we discover in all these examples that Luke was leading us through this morning, is that none of them are bad. None of them are wrong. They are all good things, nice things, decent things.

Luke's point, however, was that we can be led away from the kingdom of God, we can be distracted and diverted from that path which leads to authentic life by the good things as easily as we can by the bad. In fact, given the opportunity, Satan will almost always choose good things, nice things, decent things as his weapons of choice. We do not need to choose the evil or the bad for Satan to triumph; the lesser good will do nicely, thank you.

The kingdom of God is often as much about prioritising goods as it about choosing between goods and evils. We who choose to live life in God's kingdom cannot let ourselves be distracted and diverted from that path by the little goods that lead us away from the great ones. The third man wanted to follow Jesus but first he wanted to go home say goodbye to his family, presumably, his parents and siblings. (Not a bad thing, right?)

The point Jesus is making is that we cannot move forward if we keep one foot always in the past. We cannot look forward and backward at the same time. Our gaze must be focused only upon that which lies ahead, upon the vision God has given to us and the goals that have arisen from that vision.

In today's Gospel, Luke bookends the four stories with thinly veiled references to the change which occurred in the nature of prophecy when the mantle was passed from Elijah to Elisha. Just as the meaning of prophecy changed then, so Jesus changed the meaning of discipleship some 800 years later. Up until this story, a disciple was simply someone who followed a teacher around and learned from him. The primary activity of a disciple was simply taking notes. Here Jesus changed that. He upped the ante. He raised the bar. Discipleship, at least for those who would be disciples of Jesus Christ, no longer had just to do with learning stuff from the teacher, it has to do with being like the teacher. It has to do not just with changing our minds, but with transforming our lives. Discipleship is about transformation of the entire soul — the heart, the mind, the body — the whole kit and kaboodle. And as disciples, we are called to ask and search diligently those new things which are placed before us, to determine which are transforming our lives and which are simply changing them.

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1) *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* by Edwin Friedman.