

13th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2019
Fr Jonathan Jong

1 Kings 19.16, 19-21

Galatians 5.1, 13-18

Luke 9.51-62

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Honour thy father and mother: it is, as the epistle to the Ephesians asserts, the first commandment to come with a promise “that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you”. Chinese Christians are wont to point out that it is, in fact, the *only* of the ten commandments to overtly come with a promise: and we take it as proof positive for our Confucian values, and our right to immigrate.

I have always thought that *Elisha* the son of Shaphat could be a sort of patron saint for the Chinese. His desire to kiss his parents goodbye before joining Elijah is a paradigmatic act of filial piety. In contrast, Confucius would have been appalled at Jesus’s manners. There is, of course, that impertinence at the beginning of Luke’s gospel, when his parents find him

hanging out at the temple. And then there is that interaction between him and his mother at the wedding at Cana in John's gospel. And then there's the business of pointedly posing the rhetorical question when his family comes to visit, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And then, there's this: *leave the dead to bury their own dead; no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.* Elisha might not have made the cut.

On the face of it, this seems to be another example of the uncompromising toughness of Jesus's moral and religious demands, and so it is: but this is not the only lens through which to see it. Jesus running roughshod over the nuclear family is cut from the same cloth as his being impatient with religious hierarchy, his subverting of old ethnic rivalry, his dismissing of respectable employment and home-ownership: the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head, and neither does he have a *job*. His disciples too left the comforts and conveniences of their homes, the securities of their fishing vessels and tax booths.

The question Jesus poses to us here is this: what would happen, what would we do, if our ties of blood and land and language and capital—if the material

substrates of family, ethnicity, politics, and economics —are dissolved? And the answer we fear is that things would descend into chaos. But this is the answer Jesus resists, and St Paul too, though he did—like some of us nonstipendiary priests—have a day job on top of his galavanting around preaching the gospel. Incidentally, as it is Petertide, it is important to remember that priests are not *salaried*, not remunerated for services rendered: instead, priests are given a *stipend*. The difference is a subtle one now lost in a world that sees everything in commercial and contractual terms, but it is a crucial one. We—the community of believers—offer our clergy stipends to *free* them up from paid employment, so that they can exercise the ministry and mission to which they are called. Like Jesus and the disciples, Fr Peter does not have a job.

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Freedom is a contested term, fraught both philosophically and politically, perhaps recently more than ever. There is something unusual going on at the moment: people are simultaneously clamouring for freedom from the shackles of political correctness while hailing autocrats into power. The old ultimatum of revolutionaries like Emmeline Pankhurst and

Patrick Henry—liberty or death—has taken an ironic turn in Western democracies that are choosing to dismantle healthcare provisions while also loosening standards for agricultural and industrial products. We seem to want the freedom to die, not in the sense of laying down our lives for others, but in the sense of putting ourselves—and others—at increased risk of accident and disease. Even here, in this country, there is no doubt that we crave freedom: the trouble is that we don't seem to know what we want to do with it.

For freedom Christ has set us free, St Paul writes: which makes it sound like it's OK not to have a plan. But, of course, he does not mean that. He has very clear ideas about what freedom is for: *through love be servants of one another*. We are freed from our families and ethnic groups and nation-states and jobs and domestic property to serve one another, to love our neighbours, which is to say to love everyone. Any other option than this—than loving everyone as we would ourselves—is slavery.

And so, it is puzzling how Christianity has been received down the ages=. In our obsession with traditional nuclear families, we seem to have failed to notice that the only plausibly Christian doctrine of the

family is one in which *adoption* is paradigmatic: Jesus—he born out of wedlock—is notoriously no respecter of genetic relatedness, and we are after all adopted co-heirs with him. Our nostalgia for ethnonationalist Christendom is also baffling and disturbing: the fact that the Church has been known to support authoritarian regimes when it is convenient to do so is heartbreaking. It is worth lamenting the unseemly cosiness between the Russian Orthodox Church and Vladimir Putin and to be critical of Pope Francis’s complicity in Argentina’s “Dirty War”, but the Church of England too is a national Church, which cannot sit well with the gospel’s dissatisfaction with received ideas of the nation-state, whether Rome or Israel. This is perhaps especially true if the nation-state in question is in possession of weapons of mass destruction, as indeed we are: the United Kingdom have 120 active nuclear missiles.

It is as if we don’t want to be free, after all: it is too scary, too difficult to be freed, freed from being a Jong and a Chinese Malaysian Anglican priest-scientist, because—don’t we know?—all these identities fade in the light of Christ, our fire from heaven who consumes these recalcitrant idols of identity and security. But what a world that would be, that Jesus lived and died

to make for us? A world in which I can break through all this biological and cultural programming, and care about *your family, your country* as much as mine.

What a world, in which we love every *them* as every *us*: love Syrians and Bulgarians as we love Brits, love Muslims and atheists as we love Christians, love the poor as we love middle-class professionals who *feel* poor because we live in this ridiculous city. What a world, in which we were fit for the kingdom of God, not only to proclaim it but to live in it, to help to build it as Christ's adopted co-heirs, the goyish latecomers to this Jewish Palestinian unemployed homeless guy's feast.

If we are not yet sick and tired of self-professed Christians tipping things on the side of bigotry and xenophobia, we should be; even if this tipping is done reluctantly, noses held, for the sake of some blood pact with our chosen political parties, a covenant with some god to be broken on pain of social embarrassment. And if we don't vote for bigotry and xenophobia with our ballots and subscription fees, then we often do so with our indifference, which too is a choice. It is shameful what we have done with our freedom.

But shame is itself a pointless emotion, unless it is en route to repentance, whose orientation and direction is

hope. And there are signs of hope indeed. Six months or so ago, there was that church that held a service continuously for 96 days to stop the Dutch government from arresting and deporting a family of refugees. Holy Week the year, Christians were among the environmental activists protesting in London; St John's Waterloo welcomed them in; Rowan Williams led their vigil on Palm Sunday. There are more and more Christians at Pride. A couple of weeks ago, there was this New York Times article about how Christian hymns had become the unofficial anthems of the protests in Hong Kong against the Chinese regime's creeping authoritarian influence on the island. Eighteen-year-old Andrea Wong was asked why she was out there protesting, and she said "I am very certain that Jesus would not have stayed home enjoying the air-conditioning. He would have been out here helping people and marching". For what it's worth, I think she's right. We are free: we should act like it.

No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

