

Sunday 26th June 2016, Fifth after Trinity. Canongate Kirk.

St Luke 9:62 *Jesus said to him "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

It's one of those timeless sayings of Jesus that works across the centuries. Fields have always needed to be ploughed and always will, and whether the plough is harnessed to a pair of Biblical oxen, or a team of Clydesdale horses, or even to the latest sophisticated model of Massey Ferguson tractor, whoever is in charge needs to look ahead not back, needs to concentrate on where the plough is going rather than where it's been. There's been no shortage of agricultural metaphors in this weekend's papers reporting the aftermath of Thursday's referendum. "The ground has moved, the landscape has changed", wrote Magnus Linklater in yesterday's Times, though the most frequently used "earthquake", more geological than agricultural, was reserved for the front page. And for once they're not exaggerating, for suddenly it is as if the past itself has been ploughed up as we move into unknown territory and on to uncertain ground. And whether that ground is rich and fertile as some have predicted or stony and unyielding as others insist, remains to be seen. *Jesus said to him "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."* He was talking to a man who had asked not unreasonably whether he could go and say farewell to his family at home before setting off to follow Jesus. It's an uncompromising response, unkind even, but perhaps the last line of this morning's Gospel reading needs to be set in the context of the first. "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." For at this stage Jesus is already only too aware of the direction in which he is heading, his face is set to go to Jerusalem and he cannot afford to look back. Neither can those who would follow him, like the ploughman of his illustration they need to be entirely focussed on what lies ahead, not tempted to look back in any sense and suddenly veer off course. He's not asking anyone to do more than he himself is prepared to do, for Jesus himself had to leave his own earthly family behind, and now the days were drawing near for him to be taken up, the days when his own immediate circle of friends and followers would be left without him physically there to lead them and to guide them, and tempted perhaps not just to look back but to turn back and to veer off the course on which they had embarked in response to his challenge to follow him. Hence the sense of urgency in his response to the man who is in no particular hurry. *Jesus said to him "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

Much later, when the day was drawing much nearer when he would be taken up, like Elijah standing on the banks of the Jordan, Jesus took his disciples aside in the upper room and shared his last supper with them, the bread and the wine that would reassure them of his presence with them still, whenever they would gather to eat and drink in remembrance of him, whenever they were tempted to look back and to turn back from the course on which he had set them. Today as we gather to share in our communion service those same elements of bread and wine, may we find that same reassurance in these uncertain times, and that in the ploughman's language of the old invitation to the table, we can take his yoke upon us, and learn of him...and find rest for our souls.

*For the ploughing, sowing, reaping,
future needs in earth's safe-keeping, thanks be to God.*

And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.