

Historical Commentary



(Third Sunday of Trinitytide - Year C)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 9:51-62 (Selections from Church Fathers and John Calvin)

Cyril of Alexandria: It says, “When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This means that after he would endure his saving passion for us, the time would come when he should ascend to heaven and dwell with God the Father, so he determined to go to Jerusalem. This is, I think, the meaning of his “set his face. . .

For their benefit, he rebuked the disciples and gently restrained the sharpness of their wrath, not permitting them to grumble violently against those who sinned. He rather persuaded them to be patient and to cherish a mind that is unmovable by anything like this. . .

Christ rebuked them for their own good when they were enraged beyond measure at the hatred of the Samaritans. He did this so they might learn that as ministers of the divine tidings, they must rather be full of longsuffering and gentleness, not revengeful. They must not be given to wrath or savagely attack those who offend them.

Basil the Great: The man said, “Allow me first to go and bury my father.” The Lord replied, “Let the dead bury their dead; but go and preach the kingdom of God.” Another man said, “Let me first arrange my affairs at home.” He rebuked him with a stern threat, saying, “No man, putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” A person who wishes to become the Lord’s disciple must repudiate a human obligation, however honorable it may appear, if it slows us ever so slightly in giving the wholehearted obedience we owe to God.

Cyril of Alexandria: We learn from this that the fear of God is to be set even above the reverence and love due to parents. The law of Moses, in the first place, commanded that you shall love the Lord God with all your soul, all your might and all your heart. It put as second to it the honor due to parents, saying, “Honor your father and your mother.”

Cyprian: The Lord warns us of this in his gospel lest we return to the devil again and to the world, which we have renounced and from which we have escaped. He says, “No one, having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” Again he says, “And let him who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife.” Lest anyone, either because of some desire for wealth or by his own charm be persuaded from following

Christ, he added, “He that does not renounce all that he possesses, cannot be my disciple.”

John Calvin: *He steadfastly set his face.* By this expression Luke has informed us that Christ, when he had death before his eyes, rose above the fear of it, and went forward to meet it; but, at the same time, points out that he had a struggle, and that, having vanquished terror, he boldly presented himself to die. For if no dread, no difficulty, no struggle, no anxiety, had been present to his mind, what need was there that he should set his face steadfastly? But as he was neither devoid of feeling, nor under the influence of foolish hardihood, he must have been affected by the cruel and bitter death, or rather the shocking and dreadful agony, which he knew would overtake him from the rigorous judgment of God; and so far is this from obscuring or diminishing his glory, that it is a remarkable proof of his unbounded love to us; for laying aside a regard to himself that he might devote himself to our salvation, through the midst of terrors he hastened to death, the time of which he knew to be at hand.

You know not of what spirit you are

By this reply he not only restrained the unbridled fury of the two disciples, but laid down a rule to all of us not to indulge our temper. For whoever undertakes any thing, ought to be fully aware that he has the authority and guidance of the Spirit of God, and that he is actuated by proper and holy dispositions. Many will be impelled by the warmth of their zeal, but if the spirit of prudence be wanting, their ebullitions end in foam. Frequently, too, it happens, that the impure feelings of the flesh are mingled with their zeal, and that those who appear to be the keenest zealots for the glory of God are blinded by the private feelings of the flesh. And therefore, unless our zeal be directed by the Spirit of God, it will be of no avail to plead in our behalf, that we undertook nothing but from proper zeal. But the Spirit himself will guide us by wisdom and prudence, that we may do nothing contrary to our duty, or beyond our calling, nothing, in short, but what is prudent and seasonable; and, by removing all the filth of the flesh, he may impart to our minds proper feelings, that we may desire nothing but what God shall suggest. Christ likewise blames his disciples because, though they are widely distant from the spirit of Elijah, they rashly take upon themselves to do what he did. For Elijah executed the judgment of God, which had been committed to him by the Spirit; but they rush to vengeance, not by the command of God, but by the movement of the flesh. And therefore the examples of the saints are no defense to us, unless the same Spirit that directed them dwell in us.

John Calvin: ... commenting that the unnamed person from Luke is mentioned by Matthew as a *scribe* (Matt 8:19):

He wishes indeed to follow Christ, but dreams of an easy and agreeable life, and of dwellings filled with every convenience; whereas the disciples of Christ must walk among thorns, and march to the cross amidst uninterrupted afflictions. The more eager he is, the less he is prepared. He seems as if he wished to fight in the shade and at ease, neither annoyed by sweat nor by dust, and beyond the reach of the weapons of war. There is no reason to wonder that Christ rejects such persons: for, as they rush on without consideration, they are distressed by the first uneasiness of any kind that occurs, lose

courage at the first attack, give way, and basely desert their post. Besides, this scribe might have sought a place in the family of Christ, in order to live at his table without expense, and to feed luxuriously without toil. Let us therefore look upon ourselves as warned, in his person, not to boast lightly and at ease, that we will be the disciples of Christ, while we are taking no thought of the cross, or of afflictions; but, on the contrary, to consider early what sort of condition awaits us. The first lesson which he gives us, on entering his school, is to deny ourselves, and take up his cross, ([Matthew 16:24.](#))

Foxes have holes.

The Son of God describes by these words what was his condition while he lived on the earth, but, at the same time, informs his disciples what sort of life they must be prepared to expect. And yet it is strange that Christ should say, that he had not a foot of earth on which he could lay his head, while there were many godly and benevolent persons, who would willingly receive him into their houses. But this was spoken, it ought to be observed, as a warning to the scribe, not to expect an abundant and rich hire, as if he had a wealthy master, while the master himself receives a precarious subsistence in borrowed houses.

Whatever duties we owe to men must give way, when God enjoins upon us what is immediately due to himself. All ought to consider what God requires from them as individuals, and what is demanded by their particular calling, that earthly parents may not prevent the claims of the highest and only Father of all from remaining entire.

Allow the dead to bury their dead.

By these words Christ does not condemn burial: for it would have been shameful and cruel to throw away the bodies of the dead unburied, and we know that the custom of burying originated in a divine command, and was practiced by the saints, in order to strengthen the hope of the last resurrection. He intended only to show, that whatever withdraws us from the right course, or retards us in it, deserves no other name than death. Those only live, he tells us, who devote all their thoughts, and every part of their life, to obedience to God; while those who do not rise above the world, – who devote themselves to pleasing men, and forget God, – are like dead men, who are idly and uselessly employed in taking care of the dead.