After spending a few minutes considering this Gospel, continue by reading Fr Henry Wansbrough's reflection.

As Jesus embarks on his great journey to his death at Jerusalem, the latter half of Luke's gospel is marked by Jesus' teaching on the difficulties and challenges of discipleship. Right at the beginning of this section Jesus teaches the little lesson that the disciples must not be surprised or take vengeance when they are rejected. Then three lessons follow on the uncompromising demands of discipleship. These are not 'counsels of perfection', but demanded of every disciple of Jesus. First, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. The disciple has no right to creature comforts. Second (perhaps the most counter-cultural of all Jesus' demands), burying a dead father was regarded as a sacred duty, and yet not even this may stand in the way of a response to the call of Jesus. Third (a more rigorous condition than even Elijah demanded of Elisha), there must be no backward glance even to bid the family farewell. Not even the most sacred of natural ties may stand in the way of the demands of following Jesus. Jesus expresses his teaching with maximum vigour; these conditions may seem unfeeling and unacceptably harsh. This is partly the nature of the Semitic language (the Aramaic which Jesus spoke), which rarely uses a comparative, 'more than…' It is either day or night, no dusk! There are no half measures. We must beware of softening what remains hard.

Where does following Jesus currently fit on your list of priorities? Do any of your goals, activities, interests or desires for material comforts keep you from following Christ more closely? Is there anything that you wouldn't give up for Christ?

Dom Henry Wansbrough OSB
First Reading: The Call of Elisha

1 Kings 19:16. 19-21

The Lord said to Elijah: ‘Go, you are to anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah, as prophet to succeed you.’ Leaving there, Elijah came on Elisha son of Shaphat as he was ploughing behind twelve yoke of oxen, he himself being with the twelfth. Elijah passed near to him and threw his cloak over him. Elisha left his oxen and ran after Elijah. ‘Let me kiss my father and mother, then I will follow you,’ he said. Elijah answered, ‘Go, go back; for have I done anything to you?’ Elisha turned away, took the pair of oxen and slaughtered them. He used the plough for cooking the oxen, then gave to his men, who ate. He then rose, and followed Elijah and became his servant.

This story is clearly chosen by the Church to pair with the latter part of the Gospel reading - or even possibly the reverse, for Jesus’ call to the unnamed disciple seems to be modelled on Elijah’s call to Elisha. Elisha must have been a rich man to have twelve yoke of oxen ploughing his field – a large field and a hefty herd. Elijah’s gesture of throwing his mantle over Elisha is to claim Elisha as his own. When Elijah is taken up to heaven his mantle falls on Elisha again, giving him a double share of his spirit. By slaughtering the oxen and burning the tackle Elisha destroys his own livelihood, but he is allowed to take leave of his family before taking up the life of a prophet. Elijah was a fearless prophet of Israel, inspired by the vision of God (at the cave on Mount Horeb) and uncompromisingly defending the rights of God against idolatry (by the prophets of Baal) and injustice even by the king (appropriating Naboth’s vineyard). Elijah was expected to come again to herald the final coming of God, and many saw him in John the Baptist. Elisha was perhaps more a political operator, furthering God’s plans by the appointment of rulers.

Does Elijah think that Elisha is too slow to respond? Do you?

Second Reading: Freedom to Love

Galatians 5:1. 13-18

When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. My brothers, you were called, as you know, to liberty; but be careful, or this liberty will provide an opening for self-indulgence. Serve one another, rather, in works of love, since the whole of the Law is summarised in a single command: Love your neighbour as yourself. If you go snapping at each other and tearing each other to pieces, you had better watch or you will destroy the whole community.

Let me put it like this: if you are guided by the Spirit you will be in no danger of yielding to self-indulgence, since self-indulgence is the opposite of the Spirit, the Spirit is totally against such a thing, and it is precisely because the two are so opposed that you do not always carry out your good intentions. If you are led by the Spirit, no law can touch you.

Paul is still, as last Sunday, warning the Galatians against regarding themselves as bound by the Jewish Law. The Law, he teaches, is an external restriction, whereas Paul wants them to be led only by the interior Spirit of God, which will lead them in the paths of love. It is important to understand correctly the distinction between the flesh and the Spirit. The sins of the flesh are not merely ‘carnal’ sins like sex, greed and overindulgence. They include also such things as rivalry, jealousy, quarrels and malice. So the ‘flesh’ is best defined as self-indulgence and lack of self-discipline, perhaps unrestrained natural desires. Natural desires are not in themselves evil, but they need to be harnessed and directed by the impetus of the Spirit. On the other hand, the Spirit is the life of Christ in us, and motivates everything that leads to Christ, not only – as Paul here lists – ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control’, but also everything that builds up the community in love - loving guidance, teaching, the healing touch, as well as the more striking gifts like speaking in tongues. In 1 Corinthians he explains that each member of the community has a special gift, and all of these are needed for a healthy community.

What gifts can you contribute to the life of your Christian community? What gifts do you lack that you see in people around you?

“The Spirit is the life of Christ in us.”