



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist and Confirmation at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 5 July by the Right Reverend Fiona Gibson, Bishop of Taunton.

Prayer and Pilgrimage

The third in a series of sermons for the Year of Prayer at Wells Cathedral.

Readings: Genesis 24:34-38; 42-49; 58-67, Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30

Will you go with this man?

Six words. Just six words to change a life completely, forever. Six words that began a journey that would lead the person to whom they were spoken to places and people they could never have imagined. Six words that lie behind the questions I shall soon ask our candidates for confirmation, and that lie behind the questions I shall soon ask everyone gathered in this cathedral church this morning.

Six simple words with profound and glorious consequences.

What are those six words?

Will you go with this man? Will you go with this man?

The question is put to Rebekah by her family as Abraham's servant outlines the marriage proposal that will lead to the birth of a nation, a nation in which there will be a family, a family into which will be born the Messiah.

In our gospel reading that Messiah, the Lord Jesus, gives an invitation to all who were listening, to come to him and find rest. To take on his yoke, which is easy, and his burden, which is light. In other words, to go with him. To walk in his way and follow his road.

Will you go with this man?

In the Diocese of Bath and Wells we're just over halfway through our Year of Especial Focus on Prayer, in which we are all asked to devote ourselves more fully and more deliberately to prayer. And today, as part of the series of sermons in the Cathedral on different aspects of prayer, we're considering prayer and pilgrimage. How very apt that is, on this wonderful day when these seven confirmation candidates boldly take the next step in their own pilgrimage of faith, entering more fully into the promises made, by themselves or by others on their behalf, at their baptism. That was the day on which their life of

prayer and pilgrimage began. Today marks another waypoint in that life of prayer and pilgrimage. They are to be sealed by the Holy Spirit as I pray for them, and you pray silently with me.

They have been asked, “Will you go with this man, with Christ?” And they have answered, “I will.”

But what does it mean to go with Christ? What will it mean every day of our earthly pilgrimage, as we go with Christ?

It will mean taking on Christ’s yoke, as he invites us to do. It will mean learning from him, as he invites us to do. And it will mean finding rest for our souls, as he promises us.

Taking on a yoke, in first century Judaism, meant adopting your chosen rabbi’s rule of life. Obeying all his teaching. And Jesus is promising here that his yoke is easy, his burden is light.

In a world that seeks to weigh us down with expectations, with performance measurements, with grades, with ‘likes’, with impossible standards of perfection which we can never live up to and which weigh down our souls, Christ says, come to me. Follow me. Come with me. Walk with me. I will be carrying your burden with you. I will be pulling the plough with you. When you settle my yoke on your shoulders there will be a paradoxical removal of a weight. It will feel smooth. It will fit. You will be able to walk. Ironically, and paradoxically, Christ’s load is so light, writes St Augustine of Hippo, that it doesn’t press you down, it raises you up.

What is this yoke? This precious burden? Unlike many rabbis’ programme of doctrine: Do this, don’t do that; and on, and on, and on, Christ’s yoke, his way of life, is summed up in the two commandments he gave: love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength; love your neighbour as yourself. All of Christ’s teaching, his yoke, is found in those two commandments. They are commandments to love. And in those commandments we find joy, and rest.

When the world says, do more, be more, get more, find more, achieve more, Christ says, I have already given you everything, I have already done everything, I have already achieved everything on your behalf, so now come. Rest. Love. Walk with me. Follow me.

What does it mean to go with Christ? It means never going alone. What does it mean to go with Christ? It means never wondering whether you’re good enough. What does it mean to go with Christ? It means going in confidence. What does it mean to go with Christ? It means living in forgiveness and freedom. What does it mean to go with Christ? It means a pilgrimage of joy,

learning, and love each and every day of our lives. It means that when times are hard – and they will be, for all of us, frequently – when we feel like we're swimming in deep waters, the yoke becomes a life raft we cling onto as Christ holds us up in the depths.

To go with Christ means giving up what we can't keep – control and autonomy over our own lives – to gain what we can never lose – life with Christ in all its fullness now and in eternity.

In Christian teaching, pilgrimage has long been seen as a form of martyrdom. Not the martyrdom of shedding our blood, but the martyrdom of shedding our preferences, our self-centred desires.

These seven to be confirmed this morning are setting out bravely and joyfully on the next stage of this pilgrimage where they cheerfully and willingly hand over the SatNav of their lives to Christ and say, I will go with you. I will go with you to school; to university; to work. I will go with you in my relationships; my leisure; my home. I will go with you. I will take on your yoke and allow you to lead me. For I know you are gentle and lowly, your heart of love is turned towards me, and I can rest safe in your leading.

And something remarkable will happen as they are confirmed. To paraphrase St Augustine, when they said no to sin, the world and the devil, it was as though they were ground into pieces as their old selves were put to death.

When they were baptised, it was as though they were moistened with water, to be made into dough.

And now, as they are confirmed, as hands are laid on them and as the Holy Spirit is invited to come and strengthen them for all that lies ahead, they will receive fire as the Holy Spirit comes to them, and so they will become like baked bread, like part of the body of Christ, the body of Christ on which they will feed by faith for the first time as they receive Holy Communion.

As for these seven, so for all of us. We are all given the same invitation to come to Jesus. We are all given the same promise that he will lay his light yoke upon us and lead us. We are all promised the same rest for our souls. If you've never done so, today is a good day to take that first step. If you've come with one of the candidates, wondering what all this is about; if you've wandered into the Cathedral for the first time, drawn by the music, or by something you can't quite explain; if you've been pondering this things for a long time, today is a very good day to face the question:

Will you go with this man, Jesus Christ?

There's a cathedral full of clergy and lay ministers who will, with great joy, help you to say, "I will!"

Amen.

The Right Reverend Fiona Gibson
Bishop of Taunton

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