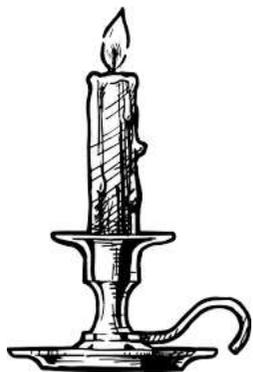


Wednesday, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2021



## THE CANDLESTICK

*No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God (Lk. 9:62)*

My grandparents were farmers who belonged to the tradition reaching back as far as the 17<sup>th</sup> century Ulster Plantation when ‘planters’ (‘settlers’) came across from Scotland and England to ‘settle’ on the island of Ireland. When I was a little boy, we used to spend some of our holidays working in their fields. We worked in all weathers, and our ‘payment’ was the sandwiches at lunchtime! We enjoyed it, but even as children, we knew we were there to do a job. When we heard our grandfather coming along the field in his old Ford-Ferguson tractor, we knew we had to have the potatoes ‘bagged’ to lift on to the trailer!

Coming up on two thousand years ago, three ‘would-be’ followers came to Jesus. They were fit and able for they had proved it in other areas of their lives. And they were, of course, very willing to give Jesus their time and effort, at a convenient occasion when their circumstances would accommodate.

The first man was very keen, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest (Lk. 9:57). What an encouragement for Jesus! ... Can you see the Saviour and His disciples walking along the country road when this exuberant individual comes running up to them. Jesus knew what kind of a man he was though for He knew this man loved his comforts. He loved his nice house, and his stability, and his place in the community ... so Jesus informed him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head (Lk. 9:58). ... If you follow Me, the Saviour said, you will have to leave it behind for it cannot have the priority. ... Sadly, he was not willing to put Jesus first ... so he left.

And another man was there too ... and Jesus gave him the *honour* of being *called* into His service. You would have thought the man would have ‘jumped’ at the invitation to follow Jesus, - it was exactly what the first man wanted ... but no, it was not to be because this second man claimed he had to stay around home and look after his father. There is nothing wrong with looking after your parents, of course, for we are told to honour them. However, this second man ‘had his sights set’ on what his father would leave him ... and if he wasn’t there, it would go to someone else! So, there was no way he would follow Jesus.

The third man greeted Jesus, Lord, I will follow thee (v.61). Fantastic! Brilliant! O for more people like this! ... Lord, I will follow thee ... Read on, though, for there is a ‘but’, but let me *first* ... His priority was all wrong. He said he would follow Jesus, he called Him ‘Lord’, and yet he had already decided for he said ‘in his next breath’, but let me first go and bid my mother and father farewell, and then I would need to go and bid my brothers and sisters, and my grandparents, and my cousins, and my aunts and uncles farewell ... let me *first* go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house.

At his core, no matter what he said, this man thought so little of the Lord’s work he reckoned he could be a servant on his own terms. He was somehow under the illusion he was doing Christ a favour, pretending to be willing to give up much. Jesus knew, though, this man’s heart was too much concerned with ‘going back’ for he had less energy or enthusiasm for going forward.

... And Jesus did not lambast him, nor upbraid him in front of those who were with Him. Instead, Jesus spoke tenderly to his heart, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.

Coming from the countryside, Jesus knew all about the farmers in the fields for He was a carpenter and He would have mended their ploughs ... He would have seen the farmers with their oxen, ploughing on the hillside from early morning until sundown. ... He saw the straight lines they ploughed, and He often heard their stories about being out in the fields working. He fixed their ploughs when they became broken on the stones underneath the soil. He knew how hard the farmers sweated and toiled, persisted and persevered, until their work was done. They worked to feed their family.

They would hook their oxen to the plough, and they would start at one side of the field and go to the other side, and back again, and again, and again. ... The practicalities required the man to put his hand to the plough, to maintain his grip, and to keep looking forwards for no-one looking backwards can ever plough in a straight line. Jesus was reminding His disciples to keep looking ahead, to focus on completing the task, and to allow nothing to hinder the progress began when they first put their hands to the plough.

One of the signs of the times leading up to the Lord’s second coming is that because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold (Mt. 24:12). Jesus warned about it, and so did Paul, for example, This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves ... lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God (II Tim. 3:1-4). ... They will have a form of godliness for they will ‘talk the talk’ but they will not ‘walk the walk’, as God’s Word instructs.

One such tragic example was Demas. At one point, Paul described him as a ‘fellow-worker’ (Philemon v.24) and in fact, during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome, Demas was in the city too (Col. 4:14). However, as time progressed, Paul wrote the sad news to Timothy, Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world (II Tim. 4:10). Regretfully, nowhere do we read of the restoration of Demas.

The tragedy of Demas is still being lived out today by those who outwardly profess to know Christ and yet choose the temporary benefits of this world over the riches of Heaven. Today there are still those who *seem* to receive the Word, - they put their hand to the plough as long as it’s easy and effortless ... but the first obstacle they meet, they are away. They are gone, and they ‘leave the plough behind’. They leave the service of the Lord, and they abandon their work for Him.

Past service is no guarantee of future faithfulness. To ‘keep our hand on the plough’ is to keep depending on the Lord as our strength and our purpose. He has called us to serve Him ... and that is our priority. Above everything else, He must come first for as someone has said, “He is either Lord of all, or not Lord at all”. We must be truly ‘born again’, otherwise we have no sure foundation of our faith, as John so solemnly expressed, They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us (I Jn. 2:19).

Therefore, the instruction comes to us clearly from God’s Word, let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:1,2) for in these perilous times when our faith is being proved, we must stand where Paul stood, when he wrote, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing (II Tim. 4:8).

If I walk in the pathway of duty,  
If I work till the close of the day;  
I shall see the great King in His beauty,  
When I’ve gone the last mile of the way.

If for Christ I proclaim the glad story,  
If I seek for His sheep gone astray,  
I am sure He will show me His glory,  
When I’ve gone the last mile of the way.

Here the dearest of ties we must sever,  
Tears of sorrow are seen every day;  
But no sickness, no sighing forever,  
When I’ve gone the last mile of the way.

And if here I have earnestly striven,  
And have tried all His will to obey,  
'Twill enhance all the rapture of Heaven,  
When I’ve gone the last mile of the way.

*When I’ve gone the last mile of the way,  
I will rest at the close of the day,  
And I know there are joys that await me,  
When I’ve gone the last mile of the way.*