

PARISHES OF
ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH
AND
SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW
WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 15th February 2026 Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Err.... How can Jesus have said that? (4)

"Another of the disciples said to Him, 'Lord, let me go first and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead'" (Matthew 8.22).

To many, Jesus' response may sound uncaring, the very antithesis of what we might expect from Him. Of course, every follower of Jesus knows that nothing can come between the primary duty of obedience to Him and to the faith. Nevertheless, would a kind Jesus not have allowed a little leeway such that the disciple could just bury his own father? And why does He add the words "*leave the dead to bury the dead*"?

The first point is that Jesus would be able to see into the man's heart. Was he truly committed to Jesus? Jesus' words may be seen as putting that question fully in the spotlight. Secondly what is likely to have been the context? Jesus would not be disrespectful of the dead and of their need for proper and dignified burial. Many commentators argue that the father was not yet dead and that the man was asking Jesus to allow discipleship to be deferred until some future, indeterminate date. It is noted that Jewish people buried (and still do bury) their dead within 24 hours of death. It is unlikely that the man would be there with Jesus had his father died that very day. If this is correct, then the man was in effect saying to Jesus, "*Let me follow You when it suits me*". His father might not die for years to come. Other worldly things may well supervene and take precedence to the single, most important duty of discipleship. It is the wrong that is echoed in the youthfully wayward statement of St Augustine: "*Master, make me chaste and celibate, but not yet.*"

Even if the man's father was dead, Jesus may have considered that, if the man went to the burial, he may not return to Jesus. Then, as now, close relatives of a deceased Jewish person are obliged to '*sit Shiva*', which means remaining at home for 7 days so that relatives and friends may come and mourn. If so, Jesus may have been concerned that the man would be distracted from the true path.

I tend to favour the explanation that the father was not dead both for the reasons given and for the fact that Jesus would have been respectful of the dead and of the Jewish mourning period.

"Leave the dead to bury their dead" seems not only harsh but nonsensical. However, Jewish people used the word *'dead'* as meaning wholly indifferent to something, such that it has no control over us. This is what St Paul meant when he said (Romans 6:11) that we must consider ourselves as *"dead to sin"*. Jesus seems to be saying that other relatives who were dead to His calling could carry out the worldly duties of burying the dead (in due course). As for the man, he was told to seize the most important moment of his life and not let it slip through his hands. This is confirmed by Jesus additional words in St Luke's account of the same incident (9:60): *"...but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."*

Stephen S.