A couple of weeks ago, RAF Leeming exercised their right of the freedom of the city of Ripon by having a parade, complete with a fly-past by a Spitfire which did 3 loops around the City before dipping its wings in salute, and heading back to base. I was invited to be present, along with Civic and community leaders.

When the parade and fly-past had ended, I had a wander round the stalls that the RAF had set up around the market square. Two in particular attracted my attention: one by 100 Squadron that fly Hawk jets (the same type of jet flown by the Red Arrows), and another by 34 Squadron: the Regiment that is deployable at 72 hours’ notice to ensure that an air-field area is marked off and protected. The Regiment gentlemen were well on their way to winning my total attention by enthusiastically giving me a free water-bottle and a grenade stress-buster (basically a squeezy grenade, and I’m not really sure that I should have one of these in my peace-keeping role? Anyway it now sits on my desk and is used fairly often; along with my stress-busting squeezy cow). After some conversation about their various roles, one of them asked me if I would like to try on some of the kit that was laid out on the table between us: which consisted of a harness that you put on like a jacket; a bullet-proof vest, and a helmet complete with dust-repellent mouth-guard – the end result being that I looked like a stormtrooper from Star Wars.

Soon, lots of smart phones were out because evidently there was a high amusement / interest factor in the Bishop dressed up in all this gear. A photo or two appeared on social media and began to attract comments:

*‘Crikey! Bit extreme to avoid getting the sun :-)’*

*‘That’d be impressive attire for Synod’* (from a Diocesan member of General Synod, which was meeting at the time in York)

*‘That could be very useful in some episcopal situations…’* (from another Bishop)

Even the Station Commander of RAF Leeming got involved by posting his own photo of me on Twitter with the comment: *‘See if you can spot the Bishop’*!

One thing that struck me when I had all the gear on, was its sheer weight, and that was without all the ammunition and other accoutrements that you would also need carry around, not to mention the actual need to work in it.

You don’t stand still wearing the kit: there are important tasks to do, and often at speed.

And then we have our Gospel reading: the one where Jesus gives some instructions to the 72 disciples (or it might be 70 depending on how you read a manuscript at this point):

*‘Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.’*

And it made me think about the amount of stuff we carry around with us.

Just what are we to make of Jesus’ instructions? Are they meant for us too?

The short answer to that is: yes!

It is an instruction that Gregory and his sister Macrina (whose feast day we remember today) followed in their lives, embracing asceticism. Gregory described the women of Macrina’s monastic community as ‘not bowed down by the weight of the body’, which reminds me of the words of G K Chesterton: ‘angels can fly because they take themselves lightly’.

What’s very clear in the Gospel narrative is the expectation that people other than the 12 apostles are going to have to do their bit to share the good news about the Kingdom of God – specifically that *the kingdom of God has come near*. This is the part of New Testament theology that I love – *realised eschatology* – something that is here but not here – it’s so close you can almost touch it, but we have to keep reaching for it in order to keep it near, discerning those glimpses where the Kingdom of God breaks into to where we are: the places where we see and sense God at work. The task of inhabiting *realised eschatology* isn’t just for academic writing; we can have it in our vocabulary too (‘eschatology’ is a handy word for scrabble, perhaps?). The task is ours, and in a sense, that’s what theological education and formation for ministry is all about. And it is serious: there’s an element of spiritual warfare in the Gospel passage, which maybe seems more at home in Matthew who tends towards more apocalyptic imagery, and for which my stormtrooper kit might actually be of use. That we get it here in Luke tells us something about perspective and worldview. We have to make sense of it means in our context; but I suggest to you that the complex and at times toxic nature of our current political discourse cries out for an and intelligent and bold articulation of Kingdom theology (in fact, anything of intelligence and reason at the present time would be highly welcome).

This pilgrim journey that we are all embarked on requires us to think about what we carry round with us (and not just literal objects, but the things that maybe get in the way of us and God at times: anxieties, fears, doubts – personal and institutional), and what we might need to let go of so that we can sense the nearness of God’s Kingdom, and point others to its reality. It’s not rocket science (to use a phrase appropriate to this season of remembering the Apollo 11 moon mission); but (to quote a former Commander of the International Space Station, Chris Hadfield), ‘an astronaut who doesn’t sweat the small stuff is a dead astronaut’. Yes, the big picture vision matters, but Jesus also taught his disciples to notice the smallest of details: the mustard seed, the lost coin, the man fallen by the wayside.

One of my favourite poets is a New Zealand poet called Glenn Colquhoun. I first heard him quoted by Archbishop Rowan Williams when Archbishop Rowan visited New Zealand at the end of 2012. It was just before the meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in Auckland, and there was an event at the theological college where I was teaching to unveil the headstone of a former Archbishop of New Zealand: Sir Paul Reeves, who went on to become Governor General. Sir Paul was a man who walked in two worlds: of indigenous New Zealanders, the Māori, and the world of in-comers, the colonising white Europeans. Glenn Colquhoun is a doctor, and a poet – he’s a man of mixed European descent who has spent time in the world of Māori, and consequently has reflected quite deeply on identity – basic questions – who am I, and what does it mean to be me where I am? Having lived and worked in New Zealand myself, I know that I have been profoundly shaped by my proximity to Māori. I experienced some of the most challenging things I have ever experienced in my life in their world – a world in which I was at once both a stranger and a guest; a representative of a colonial legacy which also brought the Gospel to those islands.

The lines of the poem by Glenn Colquhoun that Archbishop Rowan quoted are these, and I share them with you accompanied by an invitation to reflect on them in your lives as you continue your walk with God, and for this College to consider as it continues to form and nurture future deacons and priests in our Church. Listen to them as a reflection on the Gospel we have listened to.

*The art of walking upright here, is the art of using both feet.*

*One is for holding on.*

*One is for letting go.*