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Gathered as Children (Luke 13. 31-35)

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Among the gospel writers, Luke stands out for the way he locates Jesus' history within the context of world affairs. Admittedly, as New Testament scholar David Neville says, when seen 'from a broader historical perspective, Luke's story focuses on minor, indeed inconsequential characters and events'. Yet, at the same time, he seems 'determined to locate those characters and events in relation to the major socio-political realities of his day'.¹

For example, Luke begins his narrative with the words, 'In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah ...' (1:5). The passage goes on to focus on the aged Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who are about to become the parents of John the Baptist. But as Neville comments, while Luke's story 'opens with a priest and his childless wife', this 'unexpected familial news ... is contextualized within a particular socio-political setting – [in which Herod] a puppet-king of Rome ruled with an iron fist'.² Similarly, Luke's version of the Christmas story begins: 'In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should register' (2: 1-2). And so also in the exchange narrated uniquely by Luke in tonight's reading: 'At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you'. (13:31). Tonight I want to reflect a little on how Luke's socio-political locating of Jesus' life and ministry makes a difference for us and for our journey with him to Jerusalem.

¹ David Neville, 'The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me: Preaching from Luke in Year C', *St Mark's Review*, No. 213 (3) (July 2010), pp.57-70, pp.58-59.

² Neville, 'The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me', p.59.

We'll begin with the Pharisees' warning, which comes as a bit of a surprise. After all, to this point in the gospel, 'Luke has consistently identified the Pharisees as opponents of the prophets and of Jesus in particular'.³ In Chapter 11, Luke's told us that the Pharisees have a 'fixed grudge' or 'deep resentment' against Jesus; in the NRSV's translation, it's written that 'the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him ... lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say' (11:53-54). So why this sudden concern for his welfare? Why are they warning him about Herod?

Commentators suggest that, in view of this larger context of their hostility, it's likely that the Pharisees' words are designed not to secure Jesus' safety, but to cause him to shut up or run away. They seek to deter him from fulfilling his mission or, as Jesus puts it, from 'finishing his work' (13:32). Whether or not Herod does, at this moment, wish Jesus ill, it seems the Pharisees are using the *threat* of Herod to divert Jesus from his goal – which remains, as he insists, to 'go to Jerusalem'. This raises the question of what the Pharisees consider to be at stake in this journey.

So what *is* the significance of Jesus setting his face to Jerusalem? We all know that crucifixion and resurrection happen in this city, so we tend to read the journey through the lens of salvation history. Jesus says 'I must go' because he must suffer and die and on the third day be raised again. That's clearly part of what Luke is communicating here. But there's more to it than that. After all, how come the paschal events must happen here? Why not somewhere, anywhere else?

Well, as you know, in the Hebrew imagination (then as now), Jerusalem was saturated with theological and therefore with socio-political significance. The city represents the dwelling of God with God's people. It signifies the gatheredness of this people *as* a nation with a particular vocation to proclaim the one true God not only in

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series Vol.3, ed. Daniel J. Harrington SJ (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p.217.

praise and worship, but by showing forth the nature of God in the very structure of their corporate life. Let me say a bit more about this.

The people of Israel are formed *as* a people, they are ‘constituted’, through the gift of the Law – given by God through Moses. This Law commands justice and mercy, and care for the widowed and orphaned. It requires that the poor have enough to live, and that no one be permanently enslaved. This is because, by living this way, the nation makes visible the character of God – who is merciful, gracious and abounding in steadfast love. On this account, injustice, corruption, and oppression are wrong – not only because they hurt people – but because they’re a forgetting and obscuring of God whose name Israel is called to proclaim. And that’s why Israel’s prophets insist time and again that God cannot be truly worshipped, while our brothers and sisters are oppressed. ‘I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies’, thunders the prophet Amos (speaking for God): ‘Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream’ (5: 21-24).

Well – if Jerusalem represents Israel’s vocation to dwell with and manifest God in every detail of its life, then Jerusalem is where prophets go to call the nation to repent, to draw the people back to justice and true worship. Luke understands Jesus as a prophet in this tradition. In this gospel, the first words of Jesus’ public ministry come from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free’ (Luke 4:18). No wonder, then, that the religious establishment has a stake in derailing Jesus’ journey!

There’s an even deeper dimension involved. It’s not just that Jesus is a prophet on his way to Jerusalem to denounce corrupt religion and politics. It’s also that he’s in the process of calling a new people of God into being – a people whose identity and

vocation is constellated – not around the Temple or the existing religious structures – but around himself; a people who are being drawn into his relationship to the Father. The twelve disciples stand for the twelve tribes of Israel, and what’s being enacted is the formation of a new Israel.

I want to acknowledge the dangers of this way of speaking. In Christian history, the idea of the church as superseding Israel, the church as the new Jerusalem, has given rise to some terrible theology and an appalling history of anti-semitism. There’s nothing I want to endorse about that. But I do want to emphasise the extent to which Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem is a corporate and incorporating process. In his company, by his teaching, a community is being called into existence which, like the community of Israel, is to live in such a way as to make the nature of God manifest and the way of God habitable in the world. We underestimate what’s going on, if we see no more than a few individuals in a process of spiritual renewal. This corporate dimension of the journey to Jerusalem gives a particular context for Jesus’ lament over the city – this is what Jerusalem was meant to be about. And again it helps us see how threatening Jesus must have seemed to the religious establishment.

So far, this Lent, we’ve been focusing on our personal journeys of transformation. I think this week’s reading invites us to wonder what this journey to Jerusalem in the company of Jesus could mean for us together – as church and as members of this community – Benedictus. Things are possible in our common life, that aren’t possible for any of us alone; ways in which we manifest God together, that we can’t manifest separately. I have a sense of things unfolding among us already which reflect this corporate vocation: a spirit of hospitality and welcome, a shared commitment to enable each other’s transformation; ministries to children and young adults through Kaleidoscope and Kalchaino. I have no doubt other expressions of our vocation are rising up both in this community and, through you, in other communities you belong to.

I said at the beginning that, 'From a broader historical perspective, Luke's story focuses on minor, indeed inconsequential characters and events' – that's us. Yet what Luke does is to situate 'those characters and events in relation to the major socio-political realities of his day'. That's because discipleship of Jesus' way changes everything – how we relate to power, how fear does or doesn't dominate us, and who we recognize as our neighbour. We are situated, no less than Jesus was, within an economic system that favours the rich, political and religious systems intent on maintaining the status quo, with devastating consequences borne mainly by the oppressed – which now includes the earth itself. Luke invites us to dare believe that *our* journey will have an impact on all this, that together we are called to help realize the life and liberty of God.