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'He Set His Face' (Luke 9. 51-62)

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We are journeying with Jesus to Jerusalem. Not literally, of course, but figuratively, as we prepare ourselves during this season of Lent to remember Jesus' death and celebrate his resurrection at Easter. And I am wondering what this journey could actually mean for each of us, now, this year, in the particular circumstances of our lives.

To speak of 'journeying with Jesus' is particularly appropriate as we focus this year on the gospel of Luke since, compared with the other gospels, the theme of journey is strongly emphasized. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem takes 10 of the gospel's 24 chapters, and Luke makes this journey the context of much of Jesus' teaching. Our reading tonight marks the beginning of this so-called 'travel narrative' which culminates with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (19.41).

On Luke's account, the journey begins in a particular way, with particular intention: 'When the days drew near for him to be taken up', Luke writes, 'Jesus set his face to go Jerusalem'. This simple sentence has some rich references. Remember that just a little earlier in the gospel, Jesus has been transfigured on the mountain-top, in conversation with Elijah and Moses. In that scene, according to Luke, they 'were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem' (9.31). Tonight it's said he is 'to be taken up' – which draws on imagery from the Elijah story – Elijah having been taken up by God in the whirlwind.¹ And this suggests that the notions of 'departure' and 'being taken up' refer not only to Jesus' death but to the fulfilment of

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series Vol.3, ed. Daniel J. Harrington SJ (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p.162.

his meaning. 'In other words', as New Testament scholar David Neville comments, 'when Jesus sets out for Jerusalem, it is a deliberate determination to act in accordance with what he understands to be a divine imperative'. This is a journey towards God 'that includes walking, mixing with people, teaching, challenging preconceptions, provocation, betrayal, suffering, death, resurrection and, finally, ascension'.² This journey isn't just about going off to die, but involves the whole of Jesus' life and death, the whole of his teaching and meaning being fulfilled.

So that's Jesus. What about us? On Luke's account, it's as they accompany Jesus 'along the road', that the disciples too are drawn towards God, and learn what it means to be of God. Whereas for Jesus the journey is towards his 'departure', 'for his disciples and other followers the journey to Jerusalem *with Jesus* is their novitiate into a new way of life. They learn this new way on the way'.³ There's much about this way of Jesus, this way towards God, that we can glean from the teachings and encounters Luke so richly describes. But, as I realized this week, the whole 'travel section' begins by juxtaposing two approaches to being 'on the way' that can seem at first glance in tension with each other. It seems to me that this juxtaposition communicates something really important about how we are to approach *our* journeys to God, our journeys of transformation and fulfilment.

On the one hand, Jesus teaches a way of non-condemnation and non-violence, a way of peace. In fact, as Neville points out, in Luke's account the whole story of Jesus' journey to God is bracketed by the theme of peace. It's there at the beginning, when Jesus rebukes James and John for wanting (somewhat ambitiously, it must be admitted) to call down fire from heaven to consume an inhospitable Samaritan village. Significantly, Jesus differs here from Elijah who *did* call down fire on his enemies (2 Kgs

² Neville, 'The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me', p.64.

³ 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, p.63.

1.10) – so we learn that the fulfilment Jesus promises takes us beyond vindictive vengeance. And the theme of peace is at the end, when Jesus finally sees the city of Jerusalem ahead and weeps over it, saying ‘if you ... had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!’ (19.42) It’s as if, Neville says, ‘the peace theme, prominent at both beginning and end of this distinctively Lukan journey narrative, encloses and thereby holds together all the teaching material in these ten chapters – whether on discipleship, the mercy of God, money or prayer’. It’s as if the whole point of the mission is to bring peace to ‘an unreceptive, violent and often cruel world’.⁴

Yet, and here’s what feels a bit unexpected, Luke wants us to know that discipleship of this way of peace is not a matter of laissez-faire, only when you feel like it involvement. It demands urgent, whole-hearted, even uncompromising commitment. Those who would follow Jesus on this journey cannot look back or remain in the world in the same way. ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God’ (9.60). Throughout this journey section, Jesus constantly challenges his hearers to choose God, to choose life – he tells the parable of the rich fool overtaken by death just as he’s finally built barns large enough to store his grain and goods (12. 18); he challenges the religious authorities to disentangle true obedience from self-righteousness; he exhorts all to stop focusing on accumulating possessions, honour, life on their own terms. He wants to wake them up to what really matters – he provokes a sense of crisis for the time is now. And through it all, Jesus himself is urgently, uncompromisingly on his way – he has set his face, he is journeying toward Jerusalem, toward God, and the fulfilment of all that he’s come to be, do and say.

This dynamic of radical commitment without violence or self-righteousness is difficult for us to sustain. We’re accustomed to see those who think of themselves as radical and uncompromising tending to be judgmental, impatient and ruthless towards

⁴ Neville, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me’, p.65.

themselves and those they perceive as less committed. Thus the culture of much religious fundamentalism. And on the other hand, in the name of not being zealous in the wrong way, some of us subtly hold ourselves back. We don't let ourselves be too exposed, at risk or handed over. This dichotomy between fundamentalism and spiritual flabbiness is well-captured by the poet W.B. Yeats: 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity'.

What Jesus calls us to is neither of these things: neither judgmental, self-righteous, condemnatory violence; nor half-hearted, self-protective, urbane worldliness, but something much difficult. He calls us to the vulnerability of whole-hearted following. He asks us to entrust ourselves to the way without, as John Main says, a pre-packaged guarantee about what the journey will ask of us or where it will take us, *and* without seeking to reassure ourselves or disguise our vulnerability by making ourselves 'better' than others.

Lent is a time to take stock of *how* we are journeying. It's a time to be truthful about the integrity of our 'yes' to God – and the ways in which we are hedging our bets (though only, of course, for the most justifiable reasons). It's a time to pay attention to what's really going on in our choices about time, money, relationships, work, as well as to the next step we're called to take – the step (as poet David Whyte puts it) that we 'don't want to take'. What truer following looks like will be different for each of us. Sometimes it'll mean letting something go; other times, taking a stand; sometimes it's about getting real about a destructive pattern; and sometimes about not trying so hard to get it right. What it means to follow Jesus without looking back, in the circumstances of my life and yours ... well, that's something we can only learn as we commit to being on the way ... 'When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem'. And I wonder what might it mean for you to journey whole-heartedly with him these days?