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The Spirit You Are Of (Luke 9: 51-62)

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In my mind, the passion narratives in each Gospel are at the end, in the last few chapters, but here in Luke 9, not even half-way through, we see that Jesus 'set his face to go to Jerusalem'. The journey has begun.

To 'set your face' to go somewhere is saying more than that you are following a whim, or that, by happenstance, you find yourself in a certain place. Rather it is to resolve, against the odds, perhaps, to make that journey. It is a conscious decision to face up to where that journey may take you and what may happen when you get there. This is the opening verse of our reading, and I think that we make better sense of this text if we keep Jesus' resolve in mind.

We know that this journey to Jerusalem ends with Jesus' betrayal, trial, abandonment, torture and death. He would have had a pretty good idea that this was on the cards. No wonder it took some resolve to go there. So why undergo it? Why not play it safe and spend his years quietly teaching in the suburbs, writing a book, perhaps, for posterity?

Well, of course we cannot know the mind of Christ in any full sense, but Luke gives us some sense of what drove Jesus to bring matters to a head, to face the rivalrous and death-dealing culture around him with his own alternate vision of a culture beyond enmity and violence, reconciled in God, living in peace.

Let me offer two examples that will throw light on the text in Luke 9.

The first is from Luke 13:34. On the journey, Jesus had been teaching and healing, but then says, 'I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem.' Then comes his first lament: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,

but you were not willing!' This statement is very revealing of the desires of Jesus' heart, a love for this city that wants to protect it, reconcile the people in it to be one family, and for it to live in peace.

The second example is from Luke 19:41, another lament where Jesus catches sight of the city in the distance and was brought to tears. He spoke to Jerusalem as he would a person, saying 'If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace.' He then prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem, because it did not 'recognise the time of your visitation from God'.

I have stood in the church that marks the place where Jesus wept over Jerusalem. It is called 'Dominus Flevit', the Lord Wept, on the Mount of Olives looking towards the city. In it is a mosaic of a mother hen with her wings around her brood. There is a copy of this in the centrepiece tonight. There are also three banners, one in English, one in Hebrew and one in Arabic, all saying 'Peace'. Standing there, I felt a palpable sadness which had to do with the tension between Jesus' deep desires for peace and reconciliation, and the harsh reality on the ground. This is the city that killed Jesus as it did the prophets before him, and has had a long history of enmity and violence since then.

So I am thinking, back in Luke 9 when Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, he was already feeling that grief and tension palpably in his being. It was a clash of cultures. You cannot live from a vision of peace and reconciliation, and at the same time, live out of rivalry, violence and death. This clash was between the reign of God and the reign of political repression and control by murder. Jesus underwent the murder to reveal that it is *not* what the reign of God is about. Rather, his mission, his journey, was to redeem such a rule and the culture that belonged to it.

In the light of that, let us take a closer look at tonight's text. After setting off to Jerusalem, Jesus sends messengers ahead of him to prepare the way, and they began to make ready for him in a Samaritan village. But they did not receive him, because Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem. So, our attention is brought to the antagonism between the Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day. What is significant is the

disciples' response to this situation. James and John ask, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' Basically, they are asking if they can smite the Samaritans?

Everyone in this scene was born into and shaped by the enmity between Jew and Samaritan. It is just that most of them didn't realise they were socially constructed to be enemies and that it did not have to be so. In a very unreconstructed response, James and John show that they are still caught in the pattern of rivalry and retribution that has formed them. They want to reign down death on their enemies.

It is not just with the religious and political authorities in Jerusalem that Jesus has to deal, but within his own ranks, with his disciples.

To show his alternate way, Jesus rebukes them. We then come to what one commentator has called, 'The most important verse not in the Bible'.¹ At v.56, the NRSV gives a footnote saying, 'Other ancient authorities read...', and goes on to say, Jesus rebuked them 'and said, "You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them".' While Jesus is working to gather people together under his wings, his disciples are missing the point, continuing the already entrenched divisions between peoples, playing 'us and them' games, desiring death rather than life.

What comes next are three would-be followers of Jesus, and his seemingly harsh responses to them.

The first one takes the initiative and says to Jesus, 'I will follow you wherever you go'. His response is, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. Now this is neither a 'yes', nor a 'no', not a welcome or a rejection. It could be read simply as a practical message, that he is an itinerant teacher and preacher and has no accommodation that someone else can go to. Or it could be read by the themes that I have been developing so far, on the clash

¹ Dan Clendenin, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20070625JJ.shtml>
The verse is included in the King James version of the Bible.

of cultures.² Jesus could be saying that he has no home in human cultures that live from 'us' against 'them' mentalities, that he will not and cannot lay his head to rest there, but will work instead to save them. This is where he is inviting his followers to go.

In the second incident, Jesus takes the initiative, saying to another person 'Follow me'. But this person says, 'Lord, but first let me go and bury my father', to which Jesus responds, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God'.

This is hardly what you would call a pastoral response. I imagine that if, years ago, I had said to Sarah, 'I would really like to come to Benedictus, but there is a lot happening in my family at the moment, including the death of my father. Maybe I will leave it for a while'. I expect Sarah would have responded something like, 'Mmm, of course. Yes, I fully understand. And, you know, this is an important family time, so for sure, take your time, and when you are ready, you know, we look forward to you coming along to Benedictus'.

I would think that most of us here would see such a response as right and fitting, more seemingly compassionate and understanding than Jesus' 'Let the dead bury their own dead'.

So perhaps Jesus' response is not so much about pastoral care as about something else. The man wanting to bury his father may symbolise our fascination with and enslavement to cultures of death, whereas Jesus calls him to proclaim the kingdom of God, to be freed from death to proclaim life, not just in words but in his being.

In the third episode another would-be disciple says, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me say farewell to those at my home'. Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God'. Again, this

² These themes are developed in the Girardian lectionary for Luke 9:51-62: http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/proper_8c/

seems a fairly harsh response. Surely one should be allowed to say goodbye to one's family before setting off on a journey from which there may be no return?

The key to Jesus' response, I think, is about making a decision ('putting one's hand to the plow'), and living by that decision (not looking back). As I pondered this, I thought of people who try to break bad habits, whether it is smoking or gambling or addiction to online games, or habitually reacting in certain ways that have become quite unhelpful in relationships. When any of us try to break such habits, there is a certain resolve for a while, then the habit calls to us again, we start to miss whatever strange satisfactions it offered, and what it helped us to avoid.

So, we lapse back into it rather than face the future freed from it, along with taking responsibility for our own healing and transformation. Putting one's hand to the plow and looking back is to prevaricate about the decision to be free and made whole, and all that entails. Perhaps in this story, 'those at home' represent the old culture from which one is being called to follow Jesus, along with a change of life-long habits towards a more generous and universal vision. With Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem, he seems to be expecting no less from his followers.

While these are hard sayings of Jesus to his would-be followers, it helps to keep in mind where his heart is. He desires to gather people together under his wings, to break down barriers between people caused by ethnic or other hatreds, to break us out of slavery to desires that feed such hatreds, and to school us into new habits of reconciliation and peace. For that to happen, we need to be open to change, and be willing to live with him in that tension between the vision and the harsh reality on the ground. If not this, then who else shall we follow, for he is the Lord of Life and the Prince of Peace.