

Journey to Jerusalem

A sermon preached at Wheatley United Reformed Church for their Church Anniversary on Sunday 26th July 2016 by the Rev'd Pauline Main

Galations 5: 1, 13-25; Luke 9: 51-62

When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)

Our gospel passage begins a long section of Luke's gospel where the framework is Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. It's not so much a geographical journey (the geography is confusing). It's a way of gathering together elements of the story - parables, teachings and actions of Jesus - with a progression towards Jerusalem – where Jesus is “taken up” – in other words, to the place of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension.

At key points in the narrative Luke reminds us of this journey -

Ch 13 - Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. (13:22)

Ch 17 - On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. (17:11)

Jesus sense of purpose, rejection, outsiders

Jesus has made a conscious decision to “set his face to Jerusalem” and whatever is to happen there. There is movement, progression as he grasps his destiny, moving towards the place where his ministry will culminate.

On the journey, Jesus meets immediate **rejection** – from the Samaritan village that he wants to visit. Perhaps that's not surprising, given the hostility between Jews and Samaritans, especially about the rival temples in Jerusalem on Mount Gerizim (this dispute forms some of the discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, in John 4). Pilgrims to Jerusalem were not welcomed in Samaria! But Jesus still tries! He must have known that rejection was likely, but he still sends followers ahead to the Samaritan village.

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus is rejected in his **hometown**, because he dares to remind the people that God often appears to favour those outside “his own people”, or at least to care for them as much. -

there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when ... there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow ... in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian ... (Luke 4: 25-27)

Here in our passage, Jesus is proving the point, by beginning his journey with an attempted visit to disliked foreigners. Very relevant it seems to me, to all that has been done and said in recent days. Looking beyond our own boundaries. It's not an easy notion to take. The easier one is “we should look after our own”. “Charity begins at home”. We hear it often – why are we sending money overseas, often to corrupt governments, when we are cutting services here? Or in the EU referendum rhetoric – why are we ploughing money into that organisation when we need it here. We should be looking after ourselves first.

The example of Jesus challenges us to question this view, I suggest. Jesus **begins** with the outsiders. He constantly reaches out to those on the margins in his own community – the unclean, the tax collector, the prostitute ... and here, in our passage, the foreigner.

The disciples reaction

And, perhaps another lesson to us all at the moment – Jesus is reaching out to Samaritans - those who as a good Jew he will have fundamentally **disagreed with**. **How can we do that, post-referendum**, when some of us are so hurt and dismayed about the result, others jubilant. The disciples have difficulty! They react strongly to the Samaritans' rejection!

do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?

(What a good idea!!) An extreme reaction, but it rings true, if recent events are anything to go by – the horrific killing of Jo Cox; football supporters fighting those of the opposition; the vitriolic tone of much of the EU debate. But it's not just others – we too can over-react when someone disagrees with our cherished views. As I say, many of us may be feeling like that now.

Jesus' reaction

Jesus by contrast rebukes the disciples for their desire for violence, encourages them to move on to another village. “Shake the dust off your feet ...” as Matthew's gospel has it, in a similar passage. Paul also cautions the Galatians (v15) against **enmity** –

If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Nursing grievances can **poison us** as much as the other person. Paul reminds us instead to live by the fruits of the Spirit ... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As churches, Christian people, can we be models, reconcilers, in the difficult days ahead, to a nation which is so divided?

Travelling on

The gospel story moves on. There are those who want to follow, but Jesus is very aware of the **cost** of that. Not for the first time, Jesus looks towards his own suffering and death, then calls his disciples to a life of self-sacrifice.

Discipleship and its cost

Rejection again - It seems to me that rejection – which we've already mentioned - is one cost of discipleship. We like to be liked, we like to be agreed with. Sometimes it is hard to see why people reject the gospel (or our interpretation of it). Their criticism, ridicule can be hurtful, hard to take. Read some comments on the internet about church and faith matters – they can be painful reading.

Jesus was often rejected. He moved on, but rejection didn't dent his commitment to his mission. Perhaps in the churches we have let our fear of rejection inhibit our message? Aware of operating in a secular society, we try to “fit in”, rather than speak out, perhaps?

Cost - Jesus makes it clear that following him is not easy -

“I will follow you wherever you go” – someone, like Peter (perhaps it was Peter), is rather rash with his promises - sometimes like us, perhaps. Full of enthusiasm, but we don't always follow things through. The other two potential disciples say “I've got something I must do first, ” – family commitments – bury my father, say goodbye to the folks at home. So true to life. It certainly rings bells with me. I felt a call to ministry, but put off responding for a long time. There are always good reasons. Life gets in the way – family, work these are all **worthy activities!** “The most difficult choices in life are not between the good and the evil, but between the **good** and the **best**”, said the biblical scholar George Caird.

Perhaps that's another thought about the **referendum** – a decision between the good and the best. There are different views about which was which! What are the “**best**” **choices for us, for our church, for our Oxford churches**, in the context of our discipleship? At anniversary time, it's tempting to look back and see what was good in the past (and perhaps that's been the problem with the referendum), but like Jesus we are on a journey, called to move on, think about priorities, realise there may be things we must sacrifice if we are to be effective in spreading the good news of the gospel. Jesus makes it clear that these may be **hard choices**. We make them for ourselves, for our church, for our nation – then we must live them out, in faith.

Pilgrims or nomads?

What sort of journey? Philip Scharper, an American commentator says -

*“A popular church metaphor is that of the people of God on pilgrimage. But a more apt metaphor should be that of the people of God as **nomads**. Pilgrims know where their journey is headed ... Nomads are called to go by uncertain paths to a place that shall be made holy at some indefinite time by something God shall say or do. And there is no guide, no guide except a pillar of fire by night and a wind-driven cloud by day -- sounds and symbols of the Holy Spirit.”*

Our nation's journey seems rather like this at the moment ... on uncertain paths ... without a clear sight of what is ahead. Jesus seems very firm about his journey and his destination but he also says that the son of man has nowhere to lay his head. We are called to be firm in **purpose** as he was, but open to the **breath of the Spirit**. What is true for us as individuals is also the case for our church(es), and we pray for it to be true for our nation also.

May we be open to the guidance of God's Spirit in the days ahead.

Amen.