Sermon for 13th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Luke 9:51-62

i

In Chapter 9 of his Gospel which runs to 24 chapters in total, Luke introduces his account of Jesus’ journey towards Jerusalem which will end in his crucifixion.

It is possible that Luke is drawing together all the stories he can find on Jesus’ travels to Jerusalem, for although Luke follows the pattern of Matthew and Mark which suggest Jesus only visited the city once, John’s Gospel suggests at least three visits to the city, each one raising the stakes and stoking the confrontation between Jesus and the authorities which comes to a head when Jesus visits for the Passover.

Personally, I find John’s account more credible. According to John, when Jesus visited during the winter prior to his last visit for Passover in the spring, he had barely escaped with his life (John 10:30).

Yet there is a very powerful literary and symbolic effect of combining the visits to Jerusalem into one, as the synoptic writers do. Luke has been able to bring his account of Jesus’ ministry to culminate in one final cataclysmic showdown. He uses Jesus’ long and eventful journey to Jerusalem to slowly build the tension which explodes when Jesus enters the temple on Palm Sunday.

Luke is also able to use the journey towards Jerusalem as a symbol for the walk of faith; for the walk through this life with the Lord. Symbolically it works best if the journey is just a single journey in one direction, rather than several comings and goings. That way it serves as a metaphor for life and its unrelenting onward progression towards the big showdown we all face with death and judgement.

On this journey, the disciples and all who would follow Jesus in later years, such as the writer, Luke himself, have to learn what discipleship means and what it involves.

The nature of Christian discipleship is the subject of today’s Gospel reading.

ii

Earlier in the chapter, Luke has recorded Jesus urging his disciples to “take up their cross and follow him” (Luke 9:23). This is a metaphorical cross; it is the demand for followers of Jesus to deny themselves to the utmost extreme if necessary, for only in such self-sacrificing service can life be found: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9:24).

For Jesus, the cross is no longer just metaphorical, but all too real, but nonetheless he leads the way courageously towards it.

The Samaritans refuse him hospitality; yet this does not prevent Jesus from healing a Samaritan leper further down the road (Luke 17:11-19). We also know Jesus freely mixed with Samaritans, as with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. So Samaritans appear to have been confused in their response to him.

Many Samaritan townsfolk by Jacob’s well in John 4 believed in Jesus and pressed Jesus to share their hospitality for two days before moving on (John 4:40-41). The Samaritan leper in Luke 17:16 threw himself at Jesus’ feet in thanksgiving and praise.

This passage reads as if the Samaritans would have offered hospitality if Jesus had not been going to Jerusalem. Perhaps they took his desire to reach Jerusalem for the Passover as a typical Jewish rejection of their Samaritan celebrations on their holy mountain. Yet before this, Jesus had shown a truly exceptional degree of openness and friendship towards Samaritans.

Yet to follow Jesus means that you cannot remain friends with all, even if you would wish that. Following Jesus involves choices and some of those choices will set you apart from those who make different choices to you. Friendships and family ties must sometimes be broken if they would prevent you from following Christ. Even good deeds and friendly disposition will not always save you from rejection by some who have chosen not to follow Christ.

There will be times when it is metaphorically true at least that a follower of Christ has nowhere to lay his head.

In Elijah’s day, he had called down fire from heaven to alight his offering on Mount Carmel and then despatch his opponents by cutting their throats. James and John had to learn that a disciple of Christ is not one who dishes out punishment in the name of God, but one who takes it in the name of God.

iii

Further along the road we hear some of the most uncompromising words of Jesus: “Let the dead bury their own dead” and to the man who asked to first say goodbye to his family, Jesus said: “No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9: 60 & 62).

These words are shocking to us today in a Western culture that relies far less on the cohesion of the family unit and in which the very concept of family is fluid, in flux and uncertain. In Jesus’ day, family was everything. Family gave you your social status and provided you with support through childhood and in old age and determined the person you would marry and defended you in times of calamity.

To be told to let the dead go unburied, or to leave home without so much as a farewell was shocking – and it was intended to shock. It is the sort of hyperbolic speaking that we find elsewhere in the Gospels such as when Jesus suggests we “pluck out our eye” or “cut of our hand or foot” (Matthew 18:8-9).

In a pre-literate world in which people had to memorise information because they could not read it or write it down, or afford books, teachers often resorted to memorable, colourful hyperbolic speech to get their message into the memories of their disciples. Jesus clearly uses the same technique on many occasions.

Whereas Elisha had been granted a short reprieve to go and say farewell to his kinsfolk, Jesus is now calling for an even more rigorous discipline. But if Elisha, who was permitted to say farewell, received a double portion of the Holy Spirit than had been granted to Elijah, just what is in store for those who follow Christ with such dedication that, metaphorically at least, they do not even delay to say goodbye.

Pentecost is the reward for those who follow on. But the road to Pentecost goes via Calvary. Only the most determined, unflinching loyalty will get the disciple as far as Pentecost, for many a disciple will baulk at the shadow of the looming cross that stands along the path of discipleship, which always demands a measure of self-sacrifice as a prelude to great blessings.

Elisha did get it right when it came to his plough. He destroyed it. There would be no looking back for Elisha, no question of running home when the going got tough, no slowing of the pace of discipleship by dreams of other options, or of lost wealth and stability. When Elisha left his literal plough to put his hand to the plough of prophetic service, there was never any question of turning back, of looking over his shoulder in wistfulness of past possibilities, but only the straight road ahead of loyal service.

Such is the commitment Jesus is looking for from his disciples. Half-hearted discipleship, hampered by competing interests and rival dreams, is unlikely to last the course.

Coping with a rejection here and there on the way, the odd night out under the stars, the potential loss of family support, the potential thirst and hunger along the way, these things can be challenging enough to a would-be disciple of Christ, but to follow Christ all the way to the cross, to service that is truly costly, to service that gives so much that it hurts, only the most single-minded dedication will get a disciple that far.

Elijah is testing that Elisha really possess such single-minded commitment in that strange charade played out in 2 Kings 2, when Elijah appears to try to leave Elisha behind him at Gilgal, Bethel, and then Jericho, before they reached the Jordan.

Elisha passed the test. So must we, if we wish to be effective for Christ. And we shall need all the Spirit that Elisha possessed and more, if we are to follow Christ down the road that leads to Calvary.

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