

13th Sunday of Ordinary Time

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Introduction

Luke's gospel starts with Mary and Elizabeth, before the presentation at the temple, the temptation in the desert, and about five chapters of the Galilee ministry. Then Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem, in chapter nine. However, he doesn't reach there until chapter twenty... giving us many chapters of that journey to the city where tensions will reach a head.

Throughout this we see that he is moved by a particular spirit, driven by a singular imagination of what it is he is to do.

He wins and loses along the way: wins followers, and loses friends. He makes connections, and sees distance increase. Such conflicts — little and large — are always the byproduct of integrity. As you prepare for this week's reading, perhaps you may wish to reflect on times when you lost friends because of following the cause of justice. And, alongside that, you may wish to reflect on times when you distanced yourself from someone who you now realise was following the cause of right. Let us breathe, taking in that deep spirit, and seek the courage and community to follow such pathways of righteousness.

Text

Luke 9:51–62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"^a But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and

Comment

As mentioned last week, from the time of Jesus’ proclamation of his purpose – The Spirit of the Lord is upon me! – (Luke 4:16–19) up until this week’s text where he “set[s] his face to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51), there is an exhilarating, and exhausting sequence of miracles, cures, declarations, responses, impromptu gatherings, healings and public events. This Galilee ministry was characterised mostly by positive responses from the crowds – whether Jews or Gentiles – and a sense of festival. The journey to Jerusalem, introduced by this week’s text, has an entirely different emotional landscape to that of the Galilee episodes.

Jesus’ popularity was high during the Galilee ministry. Perhaps his followers thought that he’d be best served by staying in Galilee and building up popular resistance. Or, perhaps they thought that his direction towards Jerusalem was doing that very thing: amassing followers for a demonstration of opposition to the Romans.

Luke’s gospel can be categorised as a kind of travelogue in which the journey to Jerusalem takes about ten elongated, sometimes agonising, chapters. From this point in the ninth chapter to the end of the nineteenth chapter, we see Jesus of Nazareth making his way to Jerusalem, amidst building tension about what his reception in that city might be; but notably also amidst building misunderstanding among his followers about what his purpose is.

Jesus’ relationship to popularity is seen here; he doesn’t follow it. If he’s become popular, then that’s perhaps for good, or perhaps dubious, reasons. Contrary to what today might be advice for a business, or a church plant to “Find out what’s working, and keep doing it,” Jesus continues to push further and further with his work. He has a complicated, demanding purpose that he seems to fail to communicate to his followers. Of course, he tries. But they do not understand. It’s easy to think that this is the fault of the idiot disciples, but that’s making caricatures of these followers who were, after all, people under occupation of a brutal empire. Their desires for freedom and safety were noble. The convenience with which we read the text — having an overview of where it’ll end — is one that should be viewed suspiciously: it is difficult to see the landscape when you are deep in it.

Jesus’ tactic was one that both pursued, and caused, conflict: conflict with religious authorities, conflict with occupying authorities, and conflict with his followers. He would have been a difficult man to know. In the journey-to-Jerusalem narratives we see him as driven, committed, determined to pursue a pathway that seems to alienate him from his followers, and which also that causes increasing emotional anxiety in him. His parables become increasingly strained during this long road to the great city.

However, other things emerge during this time too. This is the 13th Sunday of Ordinary time. It will be the 31st Sunday of Ordinary Time before we get to the beginning of the end of this journey to Jerusalem. During this time we will encounter teaching about discipleship, teaching on prayer, opposition, stern teachings for authorities, teaching about the kingdom, the lost, money, healing and loyalty — vital things to keep in mind for the purposes of integrity. And yet, throughout all these events, encounters, parables, teachings, challenges and healings, the temporal stamp is the opening of our gospel reading for this week: “when the days drew near for him to be taken up.” The end is present all during the unfolding, as Jesus’ drive continues — sometimes bewilderingly — throughout these events.

This is the kind of leadership that isn't about winning popularity. In fact, it's the opposite. I don't even know if *leadership* is the right word to use. Jesus seems to be more interested in faithfulness —or integrity—to a cause only he seems to understand than in what we might call leadership. This caused conflict. I am sure it caused loneliness, disappointment, challenge, tension and pain.

Many of us are in roles that ask for faithfulness and integrity. Some of these roles are formally categorised as leadership, others aren't. Some might be professional, some might be among a family, or group of friends, or neighbours, or other gatherings. In the life of Jesus we see how conflict will always accompany mission. I have sometimes found comfort in this, and it has been a true support. However, other times, I have sought *excuse* in this, and in those instances, my pursuit of what was causing conflict was an indication of a lack of openness to challenge rather than a demonstration of integrity.

It's lazy and convenient to think that if I'm causing conflict then it's because I'm pursuing the right, when in fact I might be opposing it. It's lazy and cowardly to avoid conflict when I'm pursuing something just; because the world teaches us — over and over — that conflict accompanies change. Luke's Jesus has the excuse of being the Son of Man — and nobody knows what that hypostatic union means — but for everyone else, we are in the situation where the conflict we cause in the pursuit of the good must be open both to serious critique as well as continuance.

As we journey along the road to Jerusalem with Jesus these next months, we will encounter conflicts in the text, and we hope that we can meet these gospel texts with our readings of our own lives too.

Response

Who are the people in your life that attract conflict?

What are the circumstances in your life where you attract conflict?

It may be worthwhile finding some questions for yourself during times where your conflict is escalating: is the person who is causing this escalation of conflict in you doing so in the name of integrity?

If they say it's because of integrity, do you believe it is so?

What about you? Are the conflicts others might experience when around you because you're seeking integrity in your witness?

When you say it is because of your pursuit of integrity, do people believe you?

None of these questions *solve* conflicts, but it does allow us some deeper questions about some of the layers underneath conflict, and this may help us find language to help us pursue our deepest integrities alongside communication.

Prayer

*“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”
Luke 9:51*

Jesus of Nazareth,
You were seized by a singular spirit:
one that sustained you
in popularity
and in solitude.

We seek such sustenance too,
and know that we may find it in community,
in prayer,
in the pursuit of justice, and change,
in the raising of a voice in song,
or solidarity.

Deepen this spirit in us, we pray,
because it sang in you,
may it sing in us too.
Amen.