

## **Luke 13: 31-end**

### **Jerusalem, Jerusalem...**

The idea behind Lent is to make the journey to the cross with Jesus. Not that we are competing with Jesus, but acknowledging that, as Christians, we are called to take up our cross and suffer with Christ in order to rise to new life with him. St Paul recognised this in many of his letters to the early churches. Lent is a time to identify with the cost of our calling. Giving up or fasting from various things – food, activity, pleasure - is a token attempt to acknowledge the self-emptying of Christ and to humble ourselves in our own small ways.

In the wilderness and throughout his ministry, Jesus showed remarkable steadfastness and perseverance. Round about Luke chapter 9, we are told that Jesus 'set his face' towards Jerusalem. In today's reading he tells the Pharisees that *he must* be on his way. Earlier in the Gospel he says *he must* be in his Father's house (Luke 2), he *must* proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom (Luke 4), The Son of Man *must* undergo great suffering and be rejected (Luke 9, 17), he *must* stay at the house of Zacchaeus today (Luke 19). There is nothing half-hearted about Jesus' desire to complete the mission for which he was sent. For us also, Lent is a time to assess our commitment to calling we have each being given.

Jesus is not scared of Herod or his envoys posing as sympathetic friends. He describes Herod as 'that fox', openly slurring the sly, cunning and voraciously destructive character of this puppet king. Herod will not hinder the completion of Jesus' work. Both Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his death in the city will

be determined by his faithfulness to God's redemptive purposes, not by Herod. Jesus is the only person exercising choice and control here.

These words of Jesus are heavy and fateful. They clarify in advance both the fate of Jesus and Jerusalem. He will be killed in Jerusalem as were the prophets before him - Uriah, Zechariah, Isaiah – and will eventually come again as The Son of Man. Because Jerusalem rejects Jesus, its house (The Temple) will be abandoned. Judgement hangs in the air. By the time Luke wrote his Gospel, the Romans had desecrated the temple and left Jerusalem in ruins.

If this seems to present an image of an angry punishing God, we have the other, maternal metaphor of God as a mother hen and Jerusalem's inhabitants as little chicks. Time and again, God has repeatedly offered Israel, his children, motherly love and protection, but they would not receive him. When Jesus finally enters Jerusalem, the pilgrims wave palms and enthusiastically welcome him as *'the One who comes in the name of the Lord.'* Jerusalem, however, refuses to join in. It is one and the same God who has sent his prophets with patient persistence, who gathers his people under the shadow of his wings, who abandons Israel's house to destruction by God's own departure, who hides his face from his people until they are ready to welcome their Messiah.

Just before this encounter, Jesus tells a parable about a householder who gets up to close the door to his house. In the presence of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is near and the door is open. But the door is not so wide that people can saunter in casually at their own convenience; it is a narrow opening through which a person must thrust themselves with determination. It will not remain open indefinitely, and those who miss the present opportunity with Jesus may

find that they are too late. The master of the house expects his household to be indoors by locking-up time and will not be cajoled into admitting others after-hours who have ignored the door while it stood open. All who enter by the open door are members of God's family, but those who wait until the door is shut prove themselves strangers to him. Jesus was addressing these stern words to people who were refusing the invitation of the Gospel and had decided to trade their hopes for inclusion solely on their ethnicity. The hint of the inclusion of the Gentiles was a bitter pill to swallow. As we are taught, the standards of the heavenly Kingdom are so different from those of earth that there are bound to be surprises. Nevertheless, the whole chapter outlines the penalties of refusal of the Gospel in very stark terms.

When we read these words of Jesus with their OT overtones, they can be off-putting to modern sensibilities. The seasons of Advent and Lent persistently remind us of our failures and unworthiness, of the need for humility but also for determination. They also remind us that decisions have to be made and that evil is dangerous and predatory, and cannot be flirted with without risking one's physical and spiritual life; hence, Herod is a devouring fox, Satan is a deceiving serpent, the devil prowls around like a lion waiting for someone to devour, the wolf snatches God's sheep. The danger to the community of God's people is real and present.

At the same time, God offers us protection, nurture and shelter under the shadow of his wings. In the way that a woman cannot forget her nursing child, God cannot forget or abandon us. But, we have to accept God's loving protection which (like Jerusalem's ancient inhabitants) we are not always willing to do.

Lent is a time to acknowledge how hard it is for us to fulfil our potential as children of God. We give God our hearts then reclaim them; we tell Jesus we will follow him to Jerusalem, then take the nearest pleasant route laden with all kinds of interesting distractions that lead us further and further from the One who is the Way.

The door to the Kingdom lies open to us, but it is not wide enough to accommodate our baggage; we are challenged to give over to God our failures, fears, pride, greed, success, emotional wounds, defences and our need to be in control. Herod could not do this, but can we?

Jesus wanted to spare Jerusalem its suffering, but they are not willing to turn around and accept the life that is being offered to them.

Jesus wants to spare us, too. He is concerned about our present and our future. He knows that occasional, last minute, superficial connection with God is not enough to build the strong relationship of trust that enables us to ditch the psychological armour so our life in the Spirit can grow and our service to others can, sincerely, become part of who we are.

As a mother hen offers her life for the protection of her chicks, so Jesus will soon offer his life in an act that will enable spiritual intimacy for all humanity – that we may live with and in him forever. But only if we are willing...

## Let's Pray

Lent is a time to be with you, Lord, in a special way, a time to pray, to fast, and thus to follow you on your way to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, and to the final victory over death. Yet we are so divided. We want to follow you, but we also want to follow our own desires and lend an ear to the voices that speak about prestige, success, pleasure, power, and influence. Help us to become deaf to these voices and more attentive to your voice, which calls us to choose the narrow road to life.

We recognise that the choice for your way has to be made every moment of our lives. We have to choose thoughts that are your thoughts, words that are your words, and actions that are your actions. There are not times or places without choices. And we know how deeply we resist choosing you.

Please, Lord, be with us at every moment and in every place. Give us the strength and the courage to live this season faithfully, so that, when Easter comes, we will be able to taste with joy the new life that you have prepared for us. **Amen.**