



Proper 13, Year C – June 27, 2010

Luke 9.51-62

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

Do not underestimate the importance of this one sentence in the Gospel of Luke, of this one idea as a governing theme for next 19 Sundays of the Christian year, and the next 10 chapters of Luke’s gospel. Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem, and everything that happens between this moment, and his triumphal entry into the City the week before he dies, must be understood as taking place “on the way,” and in some sense as subjugated to that more important objective.

And there is plenty happening: arguments amongst the Twelve, confrontations with his critics, invitations to dine with friends and outcasts and sinners, exorcisms, healings, opportunities — lots of opportunities — to admonish and teach and correct. The parable of the Good Samaritan happens “on the way”. So does the parable of the Prodigal Son. And the story of Dives and Lazarus.

In all this, Jesus demonstrates the enviable ability to be completely present to the moment, present to the people and to the needs which confront him, while yet staying focused on his primary objective: getting to Jerusalem. This is a quality of the spiritual life, sometimes called singlemindedness, or recollection, which each of us is called to develop.

It is, I suggest, not easy.

Sometimes, our difficulty is that the goal itself is so overwhelming, so challenging, so exhilarating, or even so stressful, that we are quite simply unable to turn our attention to anything else — let alone anything else that is somebody else’s problem. I mean, after all, when you’re on your way up to Jerusalem to die, how important can it really be to sort out a quarrel about who does the lion’s share of the housework at Mary and Martha’s house? As Angus once said to me, while we sat in a coffee shop at St Michael’s Hospital in Toronto, taking a 10 minute break from our month-long Death Watch in the Intensive Care Unit, and listening to the stupid banter of the people seated all around us, “Don’t these people realise that the world has come to an end?” It’s hard to give yourself to the things life gives you when the “Main Thing” is so “main”.

But it can work the other way round, too, can’t it? How many times do we find ourselves completely distracted from our primary agenda by the thousand little things that consume our attention on a day by day basis. We are, as one friend of mine says, forever turning our attention from what is truly important in order to cope with what is merely urgent. Or to quote my father (in a somewhat expurgated fashion), “when you’re up to your behind in alligators, it’s hard to remember that your initial objective was to drain the swamp.”

Interestingly, this is the failing which Jesus happens to address in this particular passage. Jesus is “on his way” to Jerusalem, surrounded by would-be followers who ask leave to hold up the procession while they attend to a family funeral, or the bon voyage party the neighbours are throwing for them. And Jesus says, No. I require a clean break with the past. Following me isn’t about adding religion to your life: everything that used to matter to you *plus* Jesus. Following me

means letting everything that is incompatible with the journey to Jerusalem go. If you want to be a disciple of mine, you're going to have to make some decisions.

But this said, and as we have noted, while Jesus never loses sight of his primary objective, and disallows distractions which would keep him from getting there, nevertheless, he takes his sweet time attending to countless other matters "on the way". He is an accomplished master of what medical people call triage: he is innately able to distinguish between those demands which make legitimate or fruitful claims upon him, and those which do not. A dear friend of mine, when asked what difference his faith made to him, said that it allowed him to sort out the static from the music, to determine which of the barrage of claims and requests and complaints that hammered him each day were worth fine-tuning, in order that he might stop and pay them genuine attention.

As Christians, our goal is nothing less than to establish the kingdom of God on earth, and to take our place, finally, in the uncreated splendour of the divine being. And getting there requires focus, and choice. Lots of choices. To do this, but not that. To hang on to this value, or this behaviour, or this relationship, but not that. To carry at the forefront of my decision-making and attitudes this memory, or to leave it in the dust where it will no longer get in my way. And so on, and so on, and so on. We need to be assessing constantly what is merely a distraction, and what will make a difference.

Jesus, says Luke, "set his face to go to Jerusalem". He wasn't one for putting his hand to the plough and looking back. We are called to the same recollected, purposeful, single-minded approach to life.