

He set his face to go to Jerusalem
Galatians 5:1, 13-25, Luke 9:51-end



Being exposed to weekly extracts from the Gospels as we are when we follow the Revised Common Lectionary, it is all too easy to lose the sweep of the narrative that each separate Gospel contains. In S. Luke's account, if we look at the book as a whole, we see his material is carefully structured to build up to the events of Passiontide. We get a particular sense of this at the opening of today's reading – the days were drawing near for Jesus to be taken up and so, 'he set his face to go to Jerusalem'. This evokes in me a clear image of Jesus, aware of something frightful, if not wholly clear, to come, determining to go through with it. This is the sort of action with which I can identify, albeit in much less cataclysmic situations. There have been quite a few times in my life when I have had to force myself to go into situations that I would much rather have avoided, and where I have been uncertain of the outcome. Perhaps you also know the feeling? - you steel yourself, you set your jaw and you take that first step into the unknown.



In the rest of the gospel passage we find some hard sayings, but they are easier to understand when you view them in the light cast by this determination to head for Jerusalem, no matter what horrors it may hold for Jesus. Jesus and his band go into a Samaritan village, but the inhabitants want nothing to do with them because they are bound for Jerusalem, the city that the Samaritans had rejected as the place for the true worship of God.



James and John suggest that the villagers should be destroyed for their inhospitality, but Jesus will have none of it – he wants to press on to his destination. Then Jesus, on fire with determination to pursue his road, teaches his disciples how costly it might be to follow him.



It might mean abandoning the security and comforts of home, for Jesus, having chosen his course no longer can call anywhere truly home – the foxes and the birds are better off than Jesus in this respect. Truly to follow Jesus means to make that the absolute priority – there is no time to bother about stepping aside to bury even a dead father, or to say farewell to those at home. Jesus knows that, for himself, if he now wavers from his course to Jerusalem he will be undone, and those who would follow him ought to expect nothing else.

I was struck a few weeks ago by the Russian diplomat in Geneva who decided that he had to speak out against his government's invasion of Ukraine. I know nothing of his motives or his expectations, but, on the face of it he has gone against all that makes for an easy and comfortable life to espouse the cause of what is right, and that might well be life threatening. This is only one example of adherence to a principle despite the cost. There are millions of cases today, and there have been many millions more over the years, where people have preferred to follow a cause they have believed to be true, at great risk to themselves.



Many people have done this, over the centuries, desiring to be true to Jesus, and setting aside the cost to themselves. It is a very big ask, and it is not probably what is uppermost in people's minds at baptisms or confirmations, but perhaps it ought to be at least a thought in the minds of the participants.

I don't know whether you have ever had to face these sort of difficult choices in your life, whether connected with faith, or something else – for myself I don't think I have, or at least not yet – but one has to be aware that life can throw up all sorts of unexpected things, as the past couple of years must surely have made plain, and it is well sometimes to think what are the truly important things in life that you are most anxious to defend, even if the cost of doing so is high.

However, before we become too depressed, we should remember what we pray every time we say the Lord's Prayer, 'lead us not into temptation' or, in other translations, 'do not bring us to the time of trial'. This is just the sort of petition to address these questions – we know we may face difficult, even agonising, choices in our lives, but we do not go out of our way to seek them. In praying like this we follow Jesus' example in the garden of Gethsemane, before his arrest when even he prayed that the cup might be taken from him, so we need not be ashamed of praying in this way.

That leads me on to a brief consideration of the other lesson today, in which Paul, writing to the Church in Galatia, sees faith in Christ as a liberation, with the law entirely summed up in the single commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. He goes on to contrast the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit.



In considering the former we may feel that we don't come out so badly – licentiousness, sorcery, drunkenness etc. not being things to which we are much attracted.



As John Betjeman's lady praying in Westminster Abbey says, "Although, dear Lord, I am a sinner, I have done no major crime". But if that is what we think, we are, like her, in danger of a self-deluding complacency, because there are many of the works of the flesh to which we have all fallen prey at some stages of our lives, and not one of us can claim to have loved all our neighbours perfectly – human nature is not perfect, and we have to live with that fact.



The fruit of the Spirit, by the same token, include all those things to which we aspire in our lives, but we do not have to be super-self-aware to recognise that we do not always meet all our aspirations, in manifesting love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The important thing, as Paul says, is to allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit into manifesting this fruit more and more. This is not something that we could have done when we were younger, but which is impossible for us now – all these fruit of the Spirit can be ours today, which I find an encouraging thought.

Clive Lemmon