

13 March 2022, Lent 2

(Gen. 15:1-2, 17-18, Ps 27, Phil. 3:17-4.1, Luke 13:31-35)

On the way

With the current bombing of Ukraine by Russia, the opening of many borders after Covid restrictions have lifted, and homes destroyed by flood waters, many people overseas and in our country have been making journeys to try and reach a safe place, or visit family and friends. Some have succeeded and others have not. Yet when we think about it, everyone, in a sense, is on some sort of a journey. It may be a physical one, or the journey through life which all of us make, even if we remain in one place. Also, as Christians, we are now, once again, journeying through the season of Lent towards Jerusalem and the events of Good Friday and Easter Day.

In chapter 9:51 of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is said to "set his face to go to Jerusalem". His last journey there. The reference to this journey appears again a few verses before today's gospel reading, when we are told in v.22, "Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching, as he made his way to Jerusalem."

Last week we had the story of Jesus in the desert, dealing with the temptations he met at the start of his ministry. In today's reading Jesus is near the end of his ministry, and he is facing another temptation brought by some Pharisees. They told Jesus to stop travelling to Jerusalem, turn around and go away so he could escape from Herod who wanted to kill him. This statement about Herod is questionable, because although Herod killed John the Baptist he did not want to, and when Jesus was taken to Herod after his capture, we are told only that Herod had long wished to see Jesus. It has been suggested that the Pharisees wanted Jesus to leave the territory where they were living. Whatever was behind their words, the warning to avoid danger and change his plans was not one Jesus intended to obey. He was steadfast in following God's directions and continuing his journey towards Jerusalem. When replying to the Pharisees, Jesus instructed them to tell Herod, whom he images as a fox, a predator, that he must complete his healing and teaching work, and continue on his way to Jerusalem. There his followers will greet him as the promised Messiah sent by God, but his close friends will forsake him and deny knowing him, and he will be killed, as prophets have been in the past.

At this point in our reading, everything changes. The conversation with the Pharisees ends abruptly, and Jesus begins to cry out in grief for the city of Jerusalem and its people. Jesus loved Jerusalem and laments the future destruction of the city and temple in 70AD by the Romans, and the coming suffering of its people. We are reminded of how in Luke 19:41, on arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus wept over the city.

For Jesus, as for other Jews, Jerusalem was sacred. It was for them where God was particularly present in the temple. It was to Jerusalem Jesus was brought as a baby to be presented to God as the first born child. It is where Simeon and Anna recognised him as the longed for Messiah and praised God. At 12 years old Jesus was taken by Joseph and Mary to Jerusalem, and chose to stay there in his "Father's house" for several days, until he was found and taken home to Nazareth. Other visits to Jerusalem, as mentioned in John's Gospel, were also probably made by Jesus, before this final one.

When we think about Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, it reminds us of places and people we have loved, and that have changed and are no longer how we knew them. Perhaps they are where we were born, or where, for some reason, we felt 'at home', or at peace. Today Jerusalem has changed since Jesus knew it, but it still has a wall around it and the place where the Temple stood can be identified. It is now a holy place for Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Jesus' words of grief include an unexpected image describing God's compassionate love for us. Jesus has used the image of a fox to describe Herod, and now likens himself to a vulnerable mother hen protecting her chickens with her outstretched wings. This feminine image is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe God's relationship with women and men. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:12 an eagle hovering over its nest and bearing its young on its wings is used to image the relationship between God and God's people. The writer of Psalm 17:8, speaks of his desire to take refuge under the shadow of God's wings. And in the book of Ruth, the widowed Moabite foreigner Ruth, who is caring for Naomi, her Jewish Mother-in-law, was said by Boaz to have found refuge under the wings of the God of Israel (ch. 2:12.)

As many of us know, a hen trying to protect her chickens from harm will call them, extend her wings to cover them, and is even ready to die to save them, but they do not always see the danger and do not always obey. We probably have seen how frantic the mother hen can be as she urges her reluctant chickens to come to her.

When reflecting on this close relationship with God, I found other descriptions of God's tender care for us in our readings for today. In the Genesis reading, we have a conversation between God and Abram (Abraham) discussing his lack of an heir. God says to Abram, "Do not be afraid—I am your shield." God then takes Abram outside to look at the stars, and says his offspring will be of a similar number. God promises Abram a son, God also makes a covenant with Abram, promising land, but also suffering, for his descendants.

The first verse of Psalm 27 reminds us that God is our light and salvation, so we have no need to fear. Whatever happens to us, even great suffering, it is not going to separate us

from God's love. This is something we can be certain of as we follow Jesus to Jerusalem and his suffering and death. Jesus understands and shares our suffering with us.

In Philippians 4:1, Paul, reflects how Christ lovingly relates to us. Paul addresses the Christians he is writing to as, "my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved." He is gentle, loving and caring while he urges them to trust in the Lord.

As we continue to journey through the weeks of Lent towards Jerusalem, and recall the events which took place nearly 2,000 years ago, we may feel something of Jesus' fear for what is to happen and also his resolve to go where God is calling him. It is not for his own sake, but for others that he must continue.

There are times when God calls us to go in a particular direction which may not be where we desire to go. Perhaps it is to visit someone whom we would prefer to avoid and forget. Or we are in a position to speak, but refuse to because it may put us in a vulnerable position and attract criticism. Does God feel frantic when we stray off by ourselves and do not accompany Jesus where he leads the way?

When we act in this manner, we can be assured that Jesus not only understands such conflict situations but is with us in it. His presence does not guarantee that we shall avoid suffering, but it does mean that we are not alone. God's love, like that of so many mothers for their children, is surrounding us, and longs to support and protect us.

Lent can be an opportunity for us to grow in the knowledge and love of God, not just for ourselves, but to better share God's love with others in our words and actions. The hardships we meet as we travel through life, are not to be sought, but when we embrace them we may find that they become precious experiences in our lives.

Let us continue on our journey through Lent, looking forward to not just Good Friday, but the rising to new life on Easter Day. Jerusalem, the place of death and new life for Jesus, can also be a goal for us, reminding us not only of suffering, pain and grief, but of the joy and delight of transformed new life in God's love.

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13.3.22