



**Luke 13.31-35**  
**17<sup>th</sup> March 2019**

## **En route to Jerusalem**

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*Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.*

Until we had our own and took them on car journeys I never believed that children actually said: Are we nearly there yet? But they do –often!

I suspect the disciples were rather like back seat children during Christ's last journey to Jerusalem – impatient with the stopping and the teaching, frustrated by the detours or lingering at Bethany – excited by Palm Sunday and then mystified as it all seems to go down-hill from Maundy Thursday onwards.

We are joining in that journey to Jerusalem this Lent – travelling with Jesus through Luke's narrative – and this morning in chapter 13 Jesus tells us quite clearly that the temple-city was his destination – that he would leave Galilee, under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas and journey south towards Jerusalem.

And in that journey he **met surprises**.

One of the best surely comes in today's reading – Christ is given inside information that the authorities have him down as a marked man – and where does this tip-off come from? From friendly Pharisees.

We are so used to stereotyping them as Christ's pedantic opponents that it's hard for us to reassess them in this instance as the good guys.

It reminds us that all prejudice is founded on brush strokes that are too broad and general – and that human behaviour cannot be easily categorised.

Of course there were bad Pharisees and after the destruction of the temple in AD70 that particular party of the Jewish community mounted a reactionary stranglehold on the religious life of the nation. But maybe the church that Luke writes to isn't locked in conflict with the Pharisees so in his gospel there is less of an agenda behind every mention of them – perhaps of all the evangelists Luke gives us a more balanced view.

The surprise of meeting good Pharisees – but then there are many unexpected moments in the story of Jesus. He preaches an upside down message all about

the last being first or turning the other cheek. I wonder at times if I have gotten too used to these radical concepts and fail to be surprised by them anymore.

And then there are those personal encounters that so shocked the original gospel readers: Jesus deliberately rendezvousing with the woman at the well or touching village outcasts smitten with a debilitating skin disease.

For many people Lent is a time of personal reassessment. So, can I suggest something for us this morning? Don't over plan your faith - instead value the gaps and the spaces. In those pause moments, perhaps when you are least expecting it, God can surprise us with the touch of his presence. So often our prayers are filled with words and our questions long for watertight answers – yet in the silence and in the waiting – in the mystery and in the 'non-answers' - the God of surprises meets us with unexpected blessings.

So in this journey towards the cross Jesus meets with surprises – for him that came in the form of good Pharisees - and inevitably he **meets with opposition**.

Verse 32 tells us that now Herod had decapitated John the Baptist he had turned his paranoia on to Jesus – he was out to get him.

Suddenly Christ was no longer just a private citizen but an enemy of the state.

This is one of those gospel accounts reminding us that the essence of the Good News preached by Jesus isn't just about personal transformation – it's also about a community and cultural shift. Jesus upset the status quo, he challenges the way society is organised – today we might even say he became 'political'.

Yet, he is not cowed and intimidated by that puppet king, Herod, who he now calls a fox. In Jewish folklore foxes were not only deemed to be sly but also viewed as insignificant. Many of Israel's past leaders had been called 'lions'. So it was quite a put down to call Herod, with all his entourage of sycophants and soldiers, a mere 'fox'.

It's said that when Hugh Latimer, the Bishop of Worcester, preached in Westminster Abbey Henry the Eighth was unexpectedly, and overbearingly, in the congregation. These two men had already fallen out over church reform – and I guess King Henry would be an intimidating presence in any gathering. Latimer was something of an actor and spontaneously delivered a soliloquy from the pulpit explaining his dilemma: Latimer, Latimer, he said, remember the King of England is here – to which he responded, as it were, back to himself: Latimer, Latimer remember the King of Kings is here.

Latimer wasn't going to be cowed by the king's presence and neither was Jesus

going to be silenced or reined in by Herod's threats and intimidations – and in this we see something of Christ's courage, his principled convictions and dogged determination to complete his mission.

And so he prays for the templated city. Verse 34: Jerusalem, Jerusalem...

Just the name resonated – it still does – Jerusalem stands for so much, for the dwelling of God with his people, a beautiful city in which worship is central and justice is exercised. For Jesus it was really a metaphor for Israel. He's lamenting the rejection by so many in his society of the things of God. He's expressing his pain at his neighbours' indifference to the message of God. He's longing that his own nation would be touched by the love of God.

It sometimes said that history is usually written by the victors. Rather like watching an old Pathe newsreel when even a national disaster was turned, through the use of stirring music and an optimistic commentary, into something of a national triumph.

The gospels, it seems to me, are rather different. They speak of Christ's passion, of his struggles, his disappointments and setbacks – and today's passage, appropriately set for us in Lent, is just one example. Jesus struggled to be in this place – at this point in his journey he felt it tough going. Herod was against him and Jerusalem ignored him.

No wonder he told the parable of the Sower – one that resonates with our own experience – of how just one quarter of the seed broadcast produced a lasting harvest – reminding us that if even just 25% of our work here in church produces a result for the Kingdom we should rejoice.

If we meet surprises and opposition in today's lectionary en route to Jerusalem, don't we also **encounter encouragement**.

Jesus longs for those around him to be gathered, as it were, like chicks around a brooding hen. It's a picture of the tender motherhood of God – a caring, loving, protective image.

And then there is that irrepressible determination of Jesus himself that bubbles over in verse 33 when he says: Today and tomorrow I must be on my way proclaiming the Kingdom of God – and although it doesn't come over very well in the pew bibles – he uses the metaphor of the 'third day' – a day when he will do his greatest work of rising from the dead.

Jesus inspires us with an example of faithfulness in the context of struggling. When a positive response was hard to come by, when those in authority tugged at his coat tails with threats, when even a beloved city felt riddled with crushing

apathy – even at a time like this – a time as challenging as any in the Wilderness  
– Jesus presses on.

Lent somehow reminds us of those hard places in our lives – those wilderness experiences – those struggling chapters of our living. And Lent calls us to be faithful.

Tomorrow I'm due to take the funeral service in St Albans of Elspeth. She is the widow of the Senior minister, Donald, with whom I worked for the first five years after my ordination. I owe more to Donald MacKenzie than perhaps any other minister I've ever known, and as it was a privilege to speak at his funeral it will similarly be so to take the service for Elspeth.

Elspeth served alongside Donald in three pastorates. When Rachel and I knew her she constantly gave us both the most caring and kind hearted welcome anyone could have wished for at the Manse. Elspeth was always there supporting everything.

As I recall her 96 years tomorrow I will be recalling a friend who showed such constant faithfulness to her family, to her church and to her God. She was, perhaps, the first person who taught me that however much a local congregation may have its ups and downs, when homelife is good at The Manse all can be faced with a certain peace and equilibrium.

The faithfulness of such fellow pilgrims as Elspeth MacKenzie inspires us.

Jesus walked that road to Jerusalem with a faith in God that both sustained and inspired him. En route he encountered threats, rejection and indifference yet still he trusted in God. He also met with goodness and faith.

May you and I be surprised by God as we make our Lenten journey – may we give him the opportunity to speak into the gaps and spaces of our lives - and may we be encouraged and hearted by Christ's example of faithfulness as we continue our own pilgrimage of worship and service.

May it be so in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

*Ian Green, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2019, Amersham*