

We go to Jerusalem

Preached on Quinquagesima Sunday

Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

Feb. 27, 2022

Texts: 1st Cor. 13: 1-13; Luke 18: 31-43

With our Gospel for today we have reached another key stage in Jesus' Cosmic Mission. From the moment of his baptism by John one door after another has opened up revealing more and more of his identity and glorious purpose. The Doors of Heaven opened up and the Holy Spirit came down and lighted upon him as his Father declared, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Then the nuptial doors opened up in Cana. Here Jesus worked his first miracle and his disciples saw it and believed on him. It is true that the doors of his hometown, Nazareth, closed; but then the doors of Capernaum, a city right next to the Sea of Galilee, opened up. From there he went on announcing the Kingdom of God as the doors of villages all through Galilee were unbolted and he healed people of diseases and cast out demons.

The Gospels for the past three Sundays, starting with Epiphany V, have all been about planting and harvesting. Epiphany V is the story of the Enemy sowing tares among the wheat, which endangers the whole crop. In the Gospel for Septuagesima, the Lord of the vineyard had to keep hiring labors at different times of the day in order to harvest his fields, laden with grapes. Last week the parable of the sower and the seed shows how most of the seed sown sprang up quickly but finally failed to grow to maturity; but the few that did mature were superabundant. In all of this, Jesus was teaching his little band of disciples to be realists about sin in the world, while not despairing or losing faith that the Lord is indeed building his Kingdom.

Looking at it from a mere human point-of-view, most of Jesus' labor, his sermons, his healings, his miracles, and his love, yielded very little fruit. More people abandoned him than stayed, and these frequently turned on him. From the worldly view that judges on the basis of numbers, his mission appeared to be a failure. But one of the overriding points that Jesus made to his little flock was that no matter how hopeless it may appear, the Kingdom is in God's hands. And it is growing, sometimes visibly, but mostly invisibly; and it will grow and eventually fill up the whole world with the life of God.

That was recorded in Luke 8, the Gospel for Sexagesima. In Luke 9 Jesus called the Twelve together and gave them power and authority over demons and the ability to cure diseases. And he sent them out to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal. The Twelve went out from there and preached their way through the villages of Galilee healing people everywhere. The doors were opening up not just for Jesus but also for his friends. News spread all the way to Herod, who became fearful that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead.

Later, Jesus responded to Peter's confession that he was the Christ, warning the disciples not to tell this to anyone.

"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. (9: 22-24)

Jesus made this declaration to the Twelve two times in chapter 9 of Luke. At the end of the second declaration, Luke writes that the disciples were afraid to ask him about what he had spoken. (Lk. 9: 45b)

Our passage for today, Luke 18:31, is his third announcement of his approaching Passion. Weeks passed and the Twelve remained willfully and happily in the dark. They could not imagine what Jesus was talking about. But it was important enough for Jesus to announce to them three times, in secret, what they could not have known otherwise: He is the Messiah and he will suffer the most agonizing death one can imagine. A friend will betray him. The Masters of Israel will deliberately and collectively decide to have him killed. He will be handed over to the Romans, a kingdom dedicated to the will to power. People will lie about him. They will spit upon him. He will be degraded and demeaned. He will gather up into his bosom all the shame of Adam and his seed and he will make it his shame. He will be tortured and put to death. But he will rise from the dead on the third day. And he is emphatic concerning the price of following him: suffering and dying to self.

Why is this? Why must we suffer? Well, it is not because God enjoys tormenting us. It is because returning to him will be painful given our rebellious and unruly desires. Our way to God simply requires this redemptive suffering until the disorders of our souls are set in order. This is what the disciplines of Lent are about. They don't involve a flight from the world and the extinguishing of our desires so much as they intend the setting of our loves in order. They embrace the three essential characteristics of the Christian pilgrimage: the way of purgation, the way of illumination, and the way of union.

The way of purgation intends the removal of all that stands between us and God, the removal of sin and wickedness. Our reconciliation to God must be realized through the pattern of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the baptismal pattern. There has to be the constant recalling of that divine will for us, the continual renewal of our souls in love, and, of course, our perseverance in this pattern of life. The way of illumination intends our greater understanding of the will of God, the opening of our eyes to see what he wants for us. Lent reminds us of the importance of the reading and study of Scripture, for "thy word is a light unto my path." The way of union reminds us that our end is with God and that God is with us on our journey. The perfecting of our wills is accomplished in the union of our wills with God's will. He suffered for us and is with us in our suffering. The great Gospel for this day sets us upon the path of we must walk. It focuses our attention upon

the cross of Christ. It is there that the ways of purgation, illumination and union meet. It is the condition of our journey. As St. Bonaventure put it, “There is no path but through that most burning love for the crucified” (The Journey of the Mind to God).

But what is this love, and how do we come to have it? The answer is that it is the very love of God, and we come to have it only by abiding in him through Jesus. We must follow Jesus in his Passion, Death and Resurrection. We don’t understand at first; these things are hidden from us just as they were from the disciples. It requires taking up our crosses and following him. Only in this way can we come to understand, can true charity be set afire within us. Jesus says, “we go up to Jerusalem”, not I go, or you go, but we go. We must join with him. Jesus wants us to go with him in the way of his sacrifice for us, the way at once of purgation, illumination, and union. This our Christian pilgrimage.

Our journey to Jerusalem, our Lent, is to be a journey into light, a journey into understanding the mystery of divine love in the Passion of Christ. God gives so much in return for so little. That is the divine charity which, as St. Paul explains in today's Epistle, is to be the very essence of our life as Christians. Faith is an excellent thing, no doubt, and so is hope—but they are only a beginning. In heaven there is no faith or hope, because heaven is the knowledge and possession of that Eternal Good, towards which faith and hope can only aim. In heaven there is only charity, the bond of love which unites lover and beloved. Without that love, all our powers are worthless: "sounding brass and tinkling cymbals."

Therefore our journey of Lent is not just a journey of faith and hope, but a journey of love, a journey whereby we become more firm in that bond of love which unites us to God. To do this we must walk the way of Jesus. He loves us so much that he died for us, even as we are so often indifferent to this fact. And everything Jesus did was out of love for his Father—never seeking his own glory, but always seeking that of the Father. He said that true agape love makes us children of our Heavenly Father. But this love is something that is beyond our fallen flesh when we are dead in our sins. We need the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit giving us new life in Christ Jesus if we are to have this charity, without which are doings “are nothing worth,” as our Collect for today says.

When we are united to Christ, we are brought into the love of God. Indeed, God’s love for us flows out of the love between the Persons of the Trinity, a love that has always existed. We have been given the inestimable gift of participation in this Triune community. We are invited into God’s very family. And how wonderful a thing it is to become children of God! What more could we wish than to be adopted into his household, made co-heirs with our Lord Jesus?

Jesus bids us to go up with him to Jerusalem, and to find our treasure there. As we head into Lent, may we remember that the love of Christ is to be our goal. Remember that we love him because he first loved us. Remember that we are not going into the metaphorical desert to earn his love—we already have it. Rather, we repent, we fast, we pray, we practice charity, so that we can let go of those things that blunt our love for him

and for our neighbor. We discipline our flesh, we quiet the noise of life. In so doing, we can hear from the Lover of our Souls, the God who is perfect love.

In the Name...