

Lk. 9.57-62

“On the Road with Jesus”

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

1. Today’s reading from Luke’s gospel features a series of exchanges between Jesus and what many take to be the “Would-be Followers of Jesus”—that is, people whom Jesus encounters along the way to Jerusalem, there to suffer and die. The passage occurs just after a pivotal point in Luke’s gospel—namely, 9:51: “and Jesus himself set his face to go to Jerusalem.” It is important to remember that everyone Jesus meets in this section—the crowds, the disciples, people in villages along the way, like the Samaritans, etc—is offered the same route to salvation, and that is participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Today’s is a perfect Lenten text because it takes seriously the cost of discipleship, and features those who—for one reason or another—are disqualified.
2. I think it can be said that any hearer or reader of this gospel—anyone in the room—is invited—or perhaps, I should say, challenged—to be “on the road with Jesus” to Jerusalem, the city of destiny. Jesus takes the lead, and compels the hearer to come along—to repent of sin, to be baptized, to be born anew, to be “on the road” with Jesus amid all the ups and downs, the ins and outs, of this life, with all that that means. We are connected to Jesus in our baptisms into his death and resurrection (Rom 6). We dine at his table, and listen in on his table teaching at the Divine Service. We receive forgiveness in the bread and in the cup, in the Body and in the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. What happens to Jesus, the head, is in a sense shared in—yea, even experienced—by every Christian in his or her own way and time. Such is the overall movement of this magnificent passage.

3. Proceeding “on the way,” as Luke puts it, Jesus has brief encounters with three would-be followers. Here the passage is closely connected to Matthew 8 wherein two of the three would-be followers are mentioned. I take it that all three of the encounters recorded by Luke are modeled on exchanges Jesus may actually have had 100s of times over during the course of his earthly ministry—but, I think, they were “boiled down” by the synoptists to get at the heart of what it means to encounter Jesus “on the road.”
4. The first and third of the would-be followers say, in effect, “I shall follow you wherever you go.” Untried enthusiasm, in other words. One thinks of the zealous enthusiasm of the recent convert. But there are complications. The first fellow has to hear how inhospitable the world is toward Jesus, the Son of Man: “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head...” (9:58). The point may not be so obvious as we may think. Marshall suggests that a contrast is drawn here between the homes enjoyed even by animals here on earth—holes of foxes and nests of birds—and the lack of a home and rest for Jesus, the “Son of Man.”
5. But that title itself gives pause. By my counting, “Son of Man” occurs 26 times in Luke’s gospel, and the scholars say this is Jesus’ way of describing himself—in the third person, interestingly. Others have drawn the contrast between Jesus the Man and the beasts he describes: the foxes and the birds. Either way it is a put off to the would-be follower of Jesus. How could he follow Jesus when this “Son of Man” has nowhere to lay His head? Nothing more is said of the request, indicating that this one is not a follower.
6. The third fellow says, “I shall follow you, but first permit me to bid farewell to those in my home” (9:61). This alludes to the call of Elisha, featured in 1 Kings 19. You may recall the story which is a staple of Sunday School teaching still today. Near the end of Elijah’s long prophetic ministry, the LORD specifically commanded Elijah to anoint Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah to be the prophet in his place. Sometime later Elijah found Elisha plowing with 12 yoke of oxen. Elijah passed by Elisha and threw his cloak upon him, which is how prophets were made in those days.

7. Elisha left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said—and here is the point—“Let me kiss my father and my mother and then I will follow you” (1 Kings 19:20). Elijah essentially gave him permission to say farewell. Then he sacrificed the 12 yoke of oxen, boiled their flesh, gave it to the people, and went after Elijah to assist him. That had been the well-known story and biblical pattern of saying a greeting to those who were on the road.
8. But Jesus’ severity surpasses that of Elijah: “no one setting hand to plow and looking behind is fit for the Kingdom of God” (9:62). We can understand why the plowing metaphor occurs at this point in Luke’s gospel. Obviously it was taken from the old story of Elisha’s plowing with the 12 oxen. But the image has been tweaked here in the Lucan Jesus’ capable hands. Now it means that no one can plow a straight furrow if he’s looking back at yesterday’s sins and attractions. No one is “fit” for the Kingdom of God plowing forwards by looking backwards. There is no backwards look in the road with Jesus, no greeting even for those met along the way. It is a severe picture and meant to contrast markedly with the Elijah-Elisha story, biblical hospitality, and life as usual. Either we are with Jesus in his train—or not.
9. The second fellow Jesus himself approaches with the familiar “Follow me” (9:59). But there is again a complication: “Permit me first to bury my own father” (9:59). Burial of the dead was a religious duty that took precedence over everything else in the world. When I’m teaching Greek in the summers and a student loses a parent or loved one to death or tragedy, of course I let them go home to bury the dead. All my colleagues do. I’ll bet even Professor Pless allows a student to go home to bury his Grandma or a family member!
10. But not Jesus in this passage here. Again, he transcends the spirit of an already rigorous Elijah: “Let the dead bury their own dead, and you proclaim the Kingdom of God” (9:60). This is harsh. Absolutely no concessions made to one’s old Adam, to the life and patterns of before. The pertinence for studying theology and preparing to be a pastor or deaconess in Christ’s church should be obvious to seminary students such as yourselves. A lot of what seminary is about are not the academic classes as such nor doing well at Greek; rather it means

having done with besetting sin so that maybe, perhaps, God may speak his Word through such a one as you.

11. On the road with Jesus. Neither to the right nor to the left. But straight on ahead to suffering and death. In Jerusalem, the city of destiny. With Jesus. This is today's text: a Lenten theme, a Lenten discipline. But there is more to it than that. St. Paul says: "If we die with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him" (Rom 6:8). Christ dies, to be sure, but then He is raised by God the Father at an Easter beyond Good Friday. And we share in that victory. Even during Lent. But there is much to be learning. Especially during Lent. May God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

"And the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." AMEN.

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