

the way to jerusalem

a sermon preached on the

6th sunday after pentecost

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: 1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21, Psalm 16, Galatians 5:1,13-25, Luke 9:51-62

Today's gospel reveals the motif of the critical turning point in the spiritual path: "Jesus *resolutely* set his face to go to Jerusalem".¹ But 'Jerusalem' is not so much a *place*. Rather, 'Jerusalem' represents *decision*: the decision to fulfil the requirements of the paschal mystery.

Earlier in chapter 9 Jesus declared: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up the cross of themselves, daily, and follow me".² Notice that Jesus does not ask them to take up *his* cross; but the cross of *themselves*.³ So this is the decision set before all people.

The gospel shows us four kinds of responses: reminiscent of the four types of ground in the 'parable of the sower'.⁴

There are some who reject Jesus because the path he determines to take is Paschal Mystery:⁵ for they want something more manageable, more conducive to prosperity, power, and control, more in conformity with their social and religious expectations.

And there are others who *say* they want to undergo the spiritual path, but who imagine this can be done without having to leave the place where they lay their head in comfort and security.⁶

Then there are others who are really more interested in keeping the customary religious and social codes and expectations.⁷

And there are some for whom their family ties are actually their highest priority.⁸

In each case 'Jerusalem' precipitates a spiritual crisis. The crisis *will* come: the only question is, how will we respond, how will we respond to Christ's invitation for us to take up the cross of ourselves?

The gospel today puts the finger on a major impediment to facing our spiritual crisis. It's a factor about which the Scriptures are abidingly concerned; and which is highly contested. And it goes back to the formation of our religious tradition – indeed all religious *and* cultural traditions.

It's the issue of group belonging. For we gain our identity – and to some extent our security and protection – from group identity. We are all born into some form of collective identity: whether that be the Westernised 'nuclear family', or the more ancient tribal extended family. Some in this parish look to a collective identity in England, and aspects of English-speaking heritage like the Monarchy and the Book of Common Prayer. Others look to a collective identity shaped in the diverse provinces of Indonesia, including the deep influence of the Calvinism imported there by Dutch colonisers in the 19th century. All of us live in an anxious world, making ever-increasing demands upon its citizens for near-blind allegiance to the collective identity called 'nation state' – a state of affairs write very large right now in England, in the USA, here with the election almost upon us, and in so many places around the world.

Christians being spiritual descendants of the Abrahamic traditions, we too are shaped by the forces which forged a new collective identity in Palestine in the tenth century Before the

1 Luke 9:51

2 Luke 9:23

3 **σταυρον αυτου**

4 Luke 8:5ff

5 Luke 9:53

6 Luke 9:58

7 Luke 9:60

8 Luke 9:61

Common Era (BCE); the establishment of the collective as a divinely-oriented patriarchal, monarchical national structure – ‘the people of Israel’. The way of belonging to this identity was by keeping ‘the Law’. Adherence to Law ensured God’s favour as the ‘chosen’. Everything was sacrificed to this ideal – the feminine and Mother Earth paying an increasingly heavy price.

In spite of prophetic outbreaks over several centuries before his birth, this was the religious situation into which Jesus was born. He inherited this ethic dominated by conformity to the collective.

But the revelation in Jesus of Nazareth is like a major earthquake; an eruption in the collective identity. His clashes with the religious establishment are legendary – and especially his incessant challenge to the Law.

Yet Jesus himself declared that his objective was *not* rejection of the Law: but its fulfilment!⁹ Paul would later express it as we have heard today: “For freedom Christ has set us free... But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.”¹⁰ When Jesus tells a would-be follower who wants first to bury his father, “Let the dead bury the dead”, he’s revealing something about the path to the kingdom of God. His statement – shocking to the group-minded everywhere – is a revealing of the mystery of the kingdom.

So here’s the crunch: to enter the kingdom it is necessary for the person to separate themselves from their group identity: from their tribe, clan, club, family, parents, nation state, ethnic grouping, even from their religious group. Crucially, any and every kind of collective identity *will impede a person’s capacity to enter the kingdom*.

This is a hard gospel for those committed to a religious organisation. Our energies can become so fixated on all manner of institutional minutiae, on all sorts of superficial and trivial objects, customs, and irrelevances. The voice of Jesus the great pastor penetrates our situation: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Human One has nowhere to lay her/his head”.¹¹ “Let the dead bury their own dead.”

As the path to ‘Jerusalem’, then, what does true ‘spirituality’ look like? Its power is liberation from all collective-tribal identity – from the small and insecure identity shaped by external collective values, to the true identity which Jesus calls the ‘kingdom inside you’.¹² Jesus invites people to follow him: out of the small, legalistic, backward-looking identity shaped by all forms of group-think and collective belonging; to the true identity which can only be found by taking the ‘Jerusalem’ path. This is how we become truly Human Ones; how we embody the kingdom which is inside us. Jesus invites us on this way.

So it requires an inner Jerusalem, a decision: a decision with far-reaching consequences. As the gospel shows us, there are many ways of avoiding and evading the decision.

It is obvious from this, then, that true spirituality is neither an intellectual game – a set of tidy thoughts, propositions, or smooth-sounding philosophical constructions – nor the keeping of religious rules and regulations, nor allegiance to a religious club.

Rather, Jesus teaches a demanding but life-giving *way* – his early followers were called the people of ‘The Way’ – this is the way of separation from false and superficial group identity, the way to true identity, identity ‘fit for the kingdom of God’.¹³

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⁹ Matthew 5:17

¹⁰ Galatians 1:1,18

¹¹ Luke 9:58

¹² Luke 17:21

¹³ Luke 9:62