

10 On the Road to Jerusalem

9: 51 – 10: 24

We have reached a high point in Luke's Gospel, a point from which the way forward lies clear, and the end, tho a long way off, is now known to us. That is, we have reached a high point in the revelation of Jesus the Lord and in the history of the world.

Whatever his disagreements with Mark (and it is clear that Luke thought he could improve on Mark's account) Luke understood, with Mark, the dramatic significance of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. Mark set the pattern, making it Jesus' only journey to Jerusalem, and from the moment that he takes that road, leading his disciples,¹ the story moves swiftly and relentlessly to its conclusion. That is Mark's way, to tell the story quickly, because it moves with the energy and purpose of God, charged with the revelation of the Messiah which nothing can hold back.

Luke, on the other hand, recognises the wide possibilities of a journey story. Because the journey itself gives shape and direction to the story, you can afford to relax, moving from one incident to another without being too concerned about the structure. Luke had gathered and sifted a lot of material, and he had much that he wanted to use: stories, incidents, observations, teachings. The journey narrative gave him the opportunity to include everything he thought important, without having to arrange it all as an argument. So include it he does, and, unlike Mark, he takes his time over it.

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In Jerusalem, the Son of Man, Jesus, will be put to death. Mark shows Jesus' death as the Messiah's confrontation with sin, with our hostility to God in its whole range, from the spiteful gossip of a kitchen girl to the decisions of the highest institutions of government. In this confrontation the Messiah lives out his own teaching, suffering humiliation and death, even total abandonment, as it feels, by God, because he rules without resort to that power ("the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod") that decides success and failure in the world as we manage it. Mark simply leaves it at that: Jesus, even in defeat and death, is the Messiah for real, and, risen from the dead, he continues to lead his disciples.

¹ Mark 10: 32

Luke, we shall see, is of the same mind, but is not content simply to state that the risen Messiah continues to lead his disciples. Jesus' resurrection and subsequent ascension into heaven is his effective installation as Savior and King. It is the goal and explanation of his journey and his death. So Luke begins his account of the journey to Jerusalem with a statement that is not from Mark:

As the time drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face resolutely for the journey to Jerusalem. (9: 51)

Jesus is to be taken up into heaven. This should not be thought of as Jesus being taken away to another realm where he can rule, because it's not yet possible to establish his rule in this world. Quite the contrary, being taken up means being lifted to the very place of God, who does rule the world, and being established with God's own authority as the world's ruler. The climax of his life will be his vindication and exaltation to the heights of glory, ruling from the very place of God. But he is going to Jerusalem, where he will be put to death.

From now on there will be little reminders slipped into the story from time to time:

As they went along the road ... (9: 57)
He sent seventy-two others ahead of him ... (10: 1)
In the course of their journey ... (10: 38)
He went thru the towns and villages making his way to Jerusalem. (13: 22)
Today, tomorrow and the next day I must go on ... (13: 33)
on the way to Jerusalem ... (17: 11)
as he drew near to Jericho ... (18: 35)
He went on, going up to Jerusalem ... (19: 28)
As he drew near and saw the city ... (19: 41)

However much we give our attention to an incident, a teaching, a story, this is to be in our mind, that Jerusalem is the destination, that in Jerusalem the Son of Man is to be handed over into the power of men. There is no other way to his triumph.

They went into a Samaritan village to look for lodging, but because they were making their way to Jerusalem, the villagers refused them hospitality. There was deep hostility between Samaritans and Jews. James and John were ready to avenge the insult by calling down fire from heaven. They were sure that Jesus had the power, and at a word from him they would be able

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to do it. But Jesus rebuked them. They went to find lodging in another village.

It will not be Jesus' way to invoke power and to put down his enemies by force. It should not be the way of his disciples. We know that he is to rule over Israel, and that his rule will be the salvation of his people and he a lite to all the nations, but it will not be by the assertion of power. He will not establish himself by punishing hostility. Pretenders to power will usually gather forces fit to fite for them, whether it is a feudal baron gathering knights and promising them booty, or a presidential contender gathering millionaires, publicists and spin-doctors. Jesus gathers followers more like a teacher than a king, teaching them to follow his way, with very little of power or prestige. They won't win the kingdom for him, but they will share in it.

Jesus is born to rule. God will save his people by giving them Jesus as their ruler, and he is going to Jerusalem, the city of his people, for that purpose; but he is going to Jerusalem to die. And the journey itself is hard. He doesn't promise an easy life and quick rewards for his followers but a life of commitment to God in hardship. It's more like the life of a wandering outcast, a person without anywhere or anything to call their own. Even the animals and birds have somewhere to rest, but the Son of Man has nowhere.

It is a serious commitment, following Jesus. It takes precedence over everything else, for it is nothing less than engagement with the Kingdom of God. Someone offered to follow him, but only after he had seen to the burial of his father. (This mite have been a way of saying "after his father had died".) Another wanted to follow him, but first to go and take proper leave of his family. But there is no time for postponement, even for the most important duties. The coming of Jesus, of God's rule in him, changes everything and there is no time to delay your response. If anyone takes up the work but then turns back for other pressing matters, they are not fit for the Kingdom of God. For it is a revolution, a mity change in the order of the world, a new rule that will be the rule of God. If you do not respond now, you will find that the revolution has overtaken you before you have engaged with it.

What Jesus has sed here is very like the challenge to the followers of a revolutionary leader – say Mao or Ho Chi Minh or Fidel Castro. The dedication required is total, sacrificing even personal and family ties. The question is, of course, whether any revolution is worthy of such sacrifice or has the right to demand it. But the Kingdom of God demands it. Not that

the rule of God, or the teaching of Jesus, belittles family ties and the respect due to aging parents. The Law of God commands “Honor your father and your mother, that you may live long in the land your God will give you.” But here is something that is more urgent, more important even than family ties and duties.

Let us not imagine that the “Kingdom of God” means heaven after we die. Jesus is speaking of a radical change in the way the world is run, the sort of change that Miriam foresaw and celebrated, the rule of the rich and powerful being replaced by the just and generous rule of God. Nothing less than this rule of God is now breaking out in Israel and we are challenged to recognise it, to believe, to commit ourselves. And if we are to be disciples of Jesus, it will be a total commitment, with no reservation or postponement. The Kingdom of God will not wait while we make up our minds.

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Jesus chose seventy two disciples to go ahead of him, to spread the news in advance of his own coming. For the day of fulfilment has come. The harvest stands ready before them. It is a bountiful harvest, and the only shortage is of labourers. They must ask the landlord, the owner of the harvest to send more labourers into his fields. This is God’s great work and its time has come; we must look to God to send the workers.

We are so familiar with the image of a harvest, and labourers being sent, “to gather souls for the kingdom of God”, that we probably don’t realise how different it was for Jesus’ hearers. When Jesus spoke of the “harvest”, the image had been predominantly one of judgement, not salvation. The prophet Joel had spoken of a “harvest” when God would come to judge the nations, and John the Baptist had spoken of the Messiah threshing and sifting his harvest in the day of judgement.²

Moreover, they had spoken as if it would be an immediate and straightforward act of God, or of his Messiah, but Jesus now speaks of it as a work to be accomplished by labour, needing many obedient workers. A change of perception is taking place, as Jesus moves the thought and expectation of his followers from one of instant judgement: the righteous vindicated and the wicked destroyed; to one of salvation: God at work, and reaching out in him and his followers to rescue the people. “Judgement” is an attractive idea to those of us who believe we are already on the right side. “Salvation” has more to offer those who know they need the mercy of God.

² Luke 3:17 cf Matt. 3:12

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And that is why the offer of salvation itself becomes the true act of judgement, for it sorts out at once those who are open to the mercy of God and those who refuse it because they cannot believe they need it. As the disciples go off with Jesus' commission, they are bringing the news of salvation in God's kingdom. In any town where they are made welcome they are to accept the people's hospitality, to heal the sick and to tell them "The kingdom of God is near." And wherever they are not welcomed, they are to leave, shaking the dust off their feet, and to those towns too they must say, "The kingdom of God is near."

To those who welcome the offer of mercy and to those who deny their need of it the message is the same. Not "The kingdom of God will be there when you die," or "The kingdom of God will come at the end of time," but "The kingdom of God is already near" – imminently, wonderfully, dangerously near.

As I have already said, there is a difficulty for us in thinking of a kingdom. Is it the fairy-tale world of our story books? Or what some of us now experience: a legal fiction and convenient way of providing a recognisable figurehead for a secular and democratic state? In our society a king does not shape policy and government. So we must remind ourselves that in Jesus' world and in the world of Luke and his hearers kings were very much the makers of law and policy. They were in a practical and immediate way the rulers of their society. The Roman empire had imposed a wider administration, an army, and a network of high officials appointed by the emperor, but in many places kings still ruled, as long as they submitted to the emperor's appointment and Rome's requirements. Jesus' world and Luke's world had a history hundreds of years old of government by kings, and many would have thought of the Roman Emperor as a super-king. To talk of a king or a kingdom was to talk of authority, government, decision, as it would be today if we talked of a president or congress or parliament.

The other danger is that we will think of the "kingdom of God" as if it were a purely religious affair, essentially of another place and time, the world beyond death where Jesus now rules. That is just as bad. It still fails to connect with the world into which God has sent the Savior to establish his rule, except in so far as it touches individuals who want to live now so as to reach heaven when they die. That is neither the hope nor the challenge that Jesus brought to his people. The kingdom of God was a challenge for present society. Towns and communities, and, eventually, Jerusalem would have to measure up to it.

There were Israelite towns, like Chorazin and Bethsaida, confident of their righteous fulfilment of the Law of God, towns in which he had worked and done great things, but they had not accepted his word. They had not repented. They would not change; they would not accept their need to change. And as for Capernaum, the town in which he himself had settled, Capernaum saw itself as destined for glory, to be made great and lifted high: but Jesus saw its destiny elsewhere: “You will be cast down to hell.”

During the recent Democratic primaries in America, the pastor of Barak Obama’s former church made himself notorious with a ferocious denunciation of his country “Not ‘God bless America’ but ‘God damn America.’” Those Americans who hear his words with shock and horror will understand how the good citizens of Capernaum must have felt about Jesus’ judgement on them.

And those of us who think Jesus is all about individual souls being saved should think again, and begin to notice what we are actually being told in the gospels. Yes, there is a gentle and personal touch to this Messiah who heals the sick and recognizes the strong or shrinking faith of each one, praising and encouraging each as they need – but he recognizes too that we usually stand together in our sins and in our resistance to the coming of God. As communities, towns, societies and nations we reinforce one another with our prejudices and our self assurance and our mutual conviction that ours, at least, is a good society, a noble nation bound to enjoy the approval of God. It is not just individual sinners but Chorazin, Capernaum, Britain and America that must hear the judgement of Jesus upon them and submit to it, holding out our hands for mercy.

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When the disciples came back to Jesus, they were excited. “Even the devils submitted to us!” He had sent them out “as lambs among wolves”, that is, powerless in a world dominated by power. But in that very weakness they had discovered the strength of God. The powers of evil, the malice and disorder that entered into human lives to destroy them, had had to give way to them. But that is not to be their boast. Their great joy is to be that “their names are written in heaven”. Here again we must not rush on assuming that we know what Jesus means. It doesn’t mean “you are destined to go to heaven” as we might mean it. It means that they have a role in the very work of heaven, that God has determined their place and their task in that heaven which is now establishing its rule upon earth.

Jesus himself was overjoyed at what had happened. He cried out:

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“I bless you Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You have hidden all this from the learned and the experts and made it known to little children, for that has been your choice.” (10: 21)

For Jesus himself, it was a revelation of the mind and the action of God, confirming and expanding all that he had understood up to this time. The followers whom he had sent out with nothing but the authority of God had seen the strength of God reaching out to the world to establish God’s rule. It had been in their own hands. To see the work of God begun now in earnest, the rule of God effectively coming and taking the world in hand, was confirmation of that revelation he had received after his baptism. “You are my Son. Today I have begotten you.” Jesus now realises with a new depth and clarity how he is the Son of God and what it means.

Everything has been put into my hands by my Father. No one but the Father knows who the Son is. And no one knows who the Father is, except the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (10: 22)

This one verse is inexhaustible. It also comes as a surprise to those (like me) who rely on textual and literary judgements to come to a truer understanding of the story, of what was in the mind of its inspired writer. For it reads and seems like a quote from the Gospel according to John (one of the latest writings of the New Testament) and yet it comes from an early document used by Matthew and Luke. (We know this because Matthew also reports this saying of Jesus in almost exactly the same Greek words.)

When Jesus exclaims, “No one but the Father knows who the Son is. And no one knows who the Father is, except the Son,” he is not primarily addressing his disciples, to teach them, but still speaking in praise to God, blessing his Father for the hite and the depth of his close and unique relationship with God. He is understanding as never before, what it is, and so who he is.

We who believe in the divinity of Jesus mite imagine that that means the man from Nazareth went about with infinite knowledge in his head, as if the knowledge of God is the same thing as human knowledge, only infinitely more. We quite mistakenly take it for granted that altho Jesus had all the other limitations of a human being (except sin) in this one area, self knowledge, he must have been unlimited. We forget that it is not in the nature of human beings to have self-knowledge, except as a process of experience and learning. A creature endowed with total self-knowledge from

the outset would not be human. If Jesus were like that, he would really be an angel, or God, pretending to be a human being.

But Jesus, like us, learns. As a baby, he “knew” nothing, but was conscious of needs only as feeling them and reacting to them, as a baby does. As a child he grew in stature, understanding and character. When, after his baptism, he was praying to God, the word came to him as a revelation: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you,” and it was only in isolation, fasting and reflection, in the guidance of the Spirit of God, that he began to understand what it might mean. It was only in facing, at least in prospect, the temptations of power, that he was able to begin with clarity his discovery of the role of the Son of God.

Now, in the wake of the success of this first great mission, Jesus is made more aware of who he is and who God is, and what it means. Some of us know what it is to achieve success in our work or career, that moment of victory when we know that we have succeeded, and feel that, yes, this is who we are! Others experience it in sport, at whatever level they play; and others in falling in love, or marriage, or their first child. Such success is felt as a fundamental affirmation of ourselves, exhilarating and uplifting.

It is a glorious experience. But self-knowledge can be self-absorbing, narcissistic. When it comes to Jesus, in this moment of success, it comes not as any fascination with himself but rather as the calm and humble assurance that God, the Father, is the one who knows him. Far from assuming that he has now got himself sorted, he recognises that beyond all the questions and answers, beyond anything that anyone can know about him, beyond even what he yet knows about himself, only God knows the fullness of who he is.

This awakened self-knowledge in Jesus is the only way into understanding: recognising that only God can tell us who he is. And with it comes a deeper knowledge of God, the Father. We think we know God. At least, we think we know enough to identify God when we talk about “the divinity of Christ.” We speak as if we know what God is, and all we have to do is to prove, one way or another, that Jesus is that.

But in fact, we don't know God, and as Jesus now realises, no one knows the Father except the Son, and it is the Son's work to reveal him. We sometimes talk about the “divinity of Christ” as if we have two knowns, God and Christ, and what we have to do is to show that they are in some way identical. In fact, we have two unknowns, and only thru Jesus will we come to know who God is, and only God can show us who Jesus is. The divinity

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of Christ is not a subject for apologetics but for a life time of discovery, led by God.

When the young Jesus spoke of God as his Father, it was putting the relationship at the beginning. From that relationship, newly affirmed by God at his baptism, there emerged a role and an authority that was straitaway distinguished from power and its assertions. Now in the triumphant exercise of that role it becomes clear that Jesus mediates not only the energy and authority of God, but all knowledge of God. Our awareness of God and so our ability to relate to God, comes thru Jesus.

Luke's gospel does not say "Jesus is God." Probably only John's gospel comes close to such a statement, and then only after carefully setting the scene. The language doesn't yet exist for a doctrinal statement, and in any case, as I sed before, doctrines are always a reduction of the mystery and the revelation we experience in the encounter with God. Luke reports, as Jesus' growing self-awareness, what is both the mystery and the revelation of his being and the being of God; and he reports it as something that Jesus shares with his disciples and "all those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him".

What triggered off this revelation, and the cry of praise in which he shared it with his disciples was their return from the mission with enthusiastic reports of its success. It is precisely when he sees the energy and adventure of God taking place in others that Jesus is raised to this fuller vision of God at work in him. Jesus' knowledge of himself is the very opposite of an inward-looking self-contemplation: it is the recognition of God's reality flowing thru him and bearing fruit, as the work of the kingdom is taken up by the disciples. Just as the discovery of his identity and mission as the Son of God focussed on the needs and the value of others, so now the joy of his discovery that he mediates the knowledge of God stands in the active fulfilment of that mission by his disciples.

It would not have been right to stay up on the mountain, as Peter had wanted, in contemplation of Jesus and the prophets, for the fullest revelation of God in him, in all its depth and wonder, is found in the business of the kingdom, the spread of the kingdom of God as healing and freedom, energy and adventure for all the people.

I have been careful to steer away from a too "other-worldly" understanding of Jesus and of the kingdom, because that is not what Luke is giving us. But nor is Luke (and I hope not I) reducing the message of Jesus, his role and his kingdom, to a mere function of this physical world and temporal

history. There is a transcendent reality (revealed in the transformation of Jesus on the mountain) and attested here. Only it is not a religious (much less a philosophical) transcendence; it is known, appreciated, in the living, personal reality of Jesus, the savior given by God. There is mystery, but the mystery is discovered not by closing our eyes to the world, but by opening them to the change that Jesus is bringing about in the world, to the new reality that Jesus is in this world and to its complete effectiveness in the work of his followers.

It is when they have seen the kingdom coming; it is when they themselves have exercised its authority and strength and have seen people liberated by it; it is when they have already put their faith in Jesus, to do what he sends them to do, that the followers of Jesus are made aware of the mystery whose utter and transcendent reality has come among them. If questions have been asked and answers given, if they have seen and acknowledged who Jesus is, there remains the profound revelation that, ultimately, Jesus can be assessed by no one, but is known only to God, his Father.

That mystery is not a barrier closed to understanding, but a door open, inviting us to come out and explore, to know better, because we will never close the question unless we have the very knowledge of God, the Father. The mystery subsists in the person of Jesus himself, whom we know, who is teaching us, who is leading us. It does not point us to Jesus in another world, but to this Jesus who is changing our world, in whom the rule of God is coming among us, who is going to Jerusalem to die.

Jesus told his disciples, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. I tell you, prophets and kings have longed to see what you see, but they did not, to hear what you hear, but they did not." The disciples are privileged people, privileged to look upon a mighty revelation, the glory of the Son who is known only to God, and the glory of God, seen only by those to whom the Son reveals him. The window onto the utter mystery of God is this human world and its history, the coming of God's kingdom here. For God will be known, and the Son of God will be known, in the acts of the kingdom into which God draws us.