

21 As the Journey Ends

18: 9 – 19: 10

Like Mark, from whom he borrows much, Luke tells his story in a seamless flow, and altho at times we can discern sections and divisions, they do not interrupt the course of the story. Themes are not delt with separately but recur again and again thruout the narrative. The things Luke wants us to recognise are not divided up into blocks for separate memorising, but we are frequently reminded of them in events and sayings that follow one another, repeating and reinforcing the picture as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem.

And we are close to the end of that journey. There remain a few things to remind us of before we enter the city and witness what is to happen there. None of them are new, but now, coming after so many reminders, they strike us with particular force and clarity. They are final reminders. What holds them together, here, is the question “Who is fit for the coming kingdom of God? Who receives it and responds to it as God requires?”

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith anywhere? When the kingdom of God breaks upon us, who will be found redy for it? Jesus tells us the story of two men who made the journey to the Temple, to pray there:

One was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood there and prayed like this to himself: “O God, I give you thanks that I am not like the rest of men, robbers, unjust, adulterers, or like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give ten percent of everything I own.” But the tax collector stood back at a distance and was not bold enuf to lift his eyes to heven as he struck his brest and prayed: “O God be merciful to me a sinner.” I tell you, sed Jesus, it was this man rather than the other, who went back to his home justified; for everyone who exalts themself will be brought low, and everyone who humbles themself will be lifted up high. (18: 10 – 14)

We have heard a good deal about the Pharisees in this, as in all the gospels, but this is almost the last time we shall hear them mentioned by Luke. Jesus is nearing Jerusalem, where the rulers are a class of men altogether more powerful than the provincial Pharisees, and the decisive conflict will be with them. The Pharisees have sometimes been friendly to Jesus, but more often hostile. They seem to have realised, most of them at an early stage,

that the message he brought did not confirm their view of God, of society and the scriptures. It did not confirm the reputation they had acquired as leaders and exemplars in the practice of God's Law. It did not confirm the status they held in their village and town assemblies, and worst of all, it disparaged the wealth to which many of them were strongly attached.

The Pharisees believed in power: the power they had as interpreters of the Law, the power they had in the respect of the people, the power that wealth gave them, and, above all, they believed that they held this power in the very dispensation of God. A prophet preaching a kingdom that did not confirm all this, society as they knew it, the civic religious world in which they carried weight, was unacceptable, was the enemy.

Now that the Pharisee appears almost for the last time, it is as a character in a parable: a symbol of pride and self-satisfaction. The Pharisee is not without reason for his self-confidence. His regular practice is indeed exemplary fulfillment of the Law of God, which many people neglect or short cut; and he has not resorted to the ruthless self-assertion that has marked the career of many men: violence, injustice, sexual exploitation. He is not, strictly speaking, a hypocrite.

But he is complacent and self-satisfied. He has mapped out to his own satisfaction the requirements of God and, having fulfilled them to his own standards, he meets with his own profound approval. He represents every religious person who makes of God a prop for their own self esteem. To come before God convinced of our worthiness is to miss the plot. For God is real, and the real goodness of God leaves all the virtue and devotion we can muster standing and lacking. The real badness of the tax-collector, a collaborator and traitor to his people, who makes his living in the pay of the enemy, that badness, knowing itself for what it is, is able to face God and ask for mercy. And to that real humility, though the man's sins are real, God can respond.

As I said, we are nearing the end, and as we do so the great themes of the gospel rise up for final statement. This one takes us back to the beginning, John's call for repentance, to which the tax collectors and the soldiers responded, but not the Pharisees. It is both a warning and a reassurance: we are not to preen ourselves on the level of our observance, whether of the Law or of Jesus' teaching. The humble heart, that knows and faces its shortcomings, knows how to face God and will be affirmed by God.

Jesus Kyrios

People were bringing little children to him, asking him to bless them, and the disciples were trying to turn them away. They were getting in the way of the work.

But Jesus called the children over to him, telling his disciples: “Let the children come to me and don’t stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you that anyone who cannot receive the kingdom of God as a little child will not enter it.” (18: 16 – 17)

Again we are taken back to the beginning, to the time when Jesus himself was a baby and a child: the glory of God revealed as he lay receiving his first experience of life in the animals’ feeding box, and the wisdom of God coming to him as he grew up in Nazareth. This incident is one of the best known and loved from all the gospel stories, but even so we miss some of its significance from not knowing where it comes. Jesus has spoken most significantly of children, in the course of his teaching, and now it is the children who confirm and recapitulate a major theme of his teaching.

When his disciples had been arguing over rival claims to prominence, he had brought a child before them as the pre-eminent representative of God. To welcome the child that Jesus presents to them is to welcome him, and that is to welcome God. In Jesus’ own great moment of insight, when he had recognised God, and himself, and the wonderful ways of God, he had cried out “I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding all this from the clever and the experts and revealing it to children!” At the heart of the life of the kingdom is a deep trust in God, relying on God for every material need, as a child has to rely on the elders of its family for all its needs, and when we speak to God in prayer, we speak to God as our father.

Now as he welcomes the children his disciples had wanted to shoo away, we are told that everything we have learned about the kingdom of God, its high challenge, its adult responsibilities, its energy and joy and peace, its healing, its forgiveness, its welcome, belongs to such as these little children. It is those who can welcome it as a child, in total dependency, who can enter it. It is not the very “adult” self-congratulation of the Pharisee that marks us as fit for the kingdom, for the adult conscience can be skilled at fantasy, building, with long practice, its own world of points scored and targets achieved.

But neither should we imagine that, because the repentant tax-collector is an example to us, fitness for the kingdom is all about breast-beating and inward-looking lowliness that “o’er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing”. That too can be a very adult distortion. It is in our dependence

on God, not our skill at contemplating or describing our lowliness, that we become the children of the kingdom.

We are in the last stages of Jesus' teaching before the confrontation and crisis of Jerusalem, reviewing and restating its themes for the last time in his journey. What is said and seen now is rich with the variations worked on those themes in the course of his journey and his earlier ministry in Galilee. The incident of the children whom Jesus calls and blesses, comes between the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, on the one hand, and the incident of the rich man who wanted to follow Jesus, on the other. It is a most significant positioning, and one that we miss because we take the passages separately and individually.

We know the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, and we say to ourselves "Yes, we don't want to be like the Pharisee. We won't ever be acceptable to God in that way." And we know and love the story of the little children; and very beautiful we think it, that the kingdom of heaven is so simple, so innocent, so welcoming, and that Jesus is so clear and approachable. But the one that follows, the third of the triptych, we put away in the back file. If we think of it at all, we don't think of it in connection with the incident of the little children, and we try to explain it away as only an allegory.

When Jesus tells us that the little children are the very ones to whom the kingdom belongs, we are happy to endorse his teaching literally; when he goes straight on to tell us that the rich cannot enter that kingdom, we are very quick to defend ourselves: He doesn't mean it really. It's only a metaphor. It's not to be taken literally. The "riches" he has in mind are not our hard-earned material riches, but the bad habits and passions we acquire when we go about it in a purely selfish way. As if Jesus had said nothing up to now about material wealth, and had fit in very well with the role of the rich of his own society.

Let us hear the incident again, and, if possible, without falling into the sin of heresy.

A man of the ruling class said to him: "Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?" (18: 18)

He is an educated and sophisticated man, who knows how to show proper courtesy to a valued interlocutor. So he chooses an appropriate title of address: "Good Teacher". But Jesus takes him up quickly and tells him not to mess around with titles of courtesy that have more to do with

Jesus Kyrios

“correctness” than sincere and thoughtful recognition. Keep the title of “Good” for God, who alone is utterly and unquestionably good. (His comment raises serious objections – a fortiori – to our Roman Catholic practice of addressing the Pope as “Holy” or “Holiness”.)

He goes on to tell the man:

You know the commandments: “Do not commit adultery; do not kill; do not steal; do not give false witness; honor your father and your mother.” The man replied: “I have kept all these from my youth.” When Jesus heard this, he said to him: “There is still one thing for you to do: Sell your possessions and give it out to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.”

When the man heard this he was downcast, for he was a very rich man. Seeing his reaction, Jesus commented “How difficult it is for anyone with wealth to enter the kingdom of God! It’s easier for a camel to go thru the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. (18: 20 – 25)

The man was introduced as “one of the ruling class” and his wealth is mentioned only later. But it would be understood from the outset that he was wealthy. Only wealthy families got to belong to the ruling class. That link between wealth and rule which exists in almost every society and dominates in ours, was strong in Galilee and in Jerusalem. These were the people with whom Jesus had clashed, leading members of the leading families who were used to their voice being heard and respected in the local assemblies, because they were the wealthy. Those who rely on material wealth to establish a position in society are not likely to take to Jesus’ teaching.

Yet here was one rich man, a good man, who kept the commandments and realised that something more was wanted if he was to attain eternal life. And he recognised Jesus as a teacher who could tell him what it was. But when Jesus did so, he could not accept it. There are those of us who look upon the kingdom of God, and want it, but when it comes to the point, we don’t want to give up our share in a rival kingdom, a rival system of power, influence and reward from which we benefit. In Jesus’ experience, and in the experience of the Christian Church since, that rival system is usually and pre-eminently money.

Thruout the history of Israel, prophets had sought to bring about a change in Israel, a change of heart in repentance, a return to the loyal service of Yahweh their God. Almost always this meant exhorting them to turn away

from the worship of false gods, the rivals to Yahweh that were the gods of powerful neighbors, or the old familiar local gods of the land they lived in. In this, their work and the work of God seems to have succeeded by Jesus' time. We see no sign of idolatry in Israel any more. Neither John nor Jesus needed to denounce the Baals or other false gods. The Jews, it seems, were not even tempted to take up with the gods of Greece or Rome.

But there was one false god who still had a grip on them, the god Mammon, or Money. Jesus had had to warn them "You cannot serve both God and money." And the service of Money is a slavery from which the kingdom will set us free. The rich man had wanted to share the eternal life of the kingdom, but giving up money was too much for him. He had hoped for something, challenging and exciting perhaps, but able to be scheduled in with the life of a wealthy man.

When Jesus reflected that it is easier for a camel to get thru the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom, the people listening to him were dismayed. If the requirements are so hard, how can anyone get in? Don't we all look up to the rich? And even those who aren't rich surely desire to be so? If those are the conditions, how can anyone be saved? But Jesus told them "What is impossible for people is possible for God." He wasn't going back on what he had just said, and deciding that, after all, rich people would be able to enter the kingdom, and camels would squeeze thru the eyes of needles. He was asserting that God would be able to win the hearts even of the rich away from their riches. Events would shortly show him to be right.

Peter decided that now was the appropriate time to observe that, in fact, he and Jesus' other disciples had left their possessions to follow him. Jesus assured them: "Nobody who gives up their house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom, will fail to receive a return many times over in this age, and in the age to come, eternal life.

This completes that other difficult teaching, that we must make the kingdom of God our choice even if it means repudiating wife, child, family. It is a challenging revolution that has broken upon us. But it will not be all challenge and sacrifice. It will not be all ideals in the sky. Even in this age, the age of the revolution itself, before the kingdom has been established, those who give up what they have and what they might have, for the sake of the kingdom of God, will find that they receive back, many times over, the gifts of God.

Jesus Kyrios

God is not demanding, but generous and giving. And those who have tried to live for the kingdom, giving up their possessions, and those who have found that they must give up family and even their dearest relations, and those who, for the sake of the kingdom, gave up in advance the possibility of owning a house or having a husband, wife or family, have found that God does indeed return the gift, many times over, in the friends and blessings God gives them thruout their lives. It's not a calculation, or an account settled in due course, but the practical blessing of God in a life that is dedicated to the rule of God.

And in the age to come, that of the kingdom established, eternal life is God's promise: what the rich man wanted, but could not pay the price. Here again, "eternal life" is not defined but rather draws on the traditional understanding that Jesus' hearers bring to it. Some would have pictured entry into a new and greater life with the arrival of the kingdom before their present life had run its course. Others would have envisaged the life to be given them in the resurrection of the just, which many of the Jews now expected. Few, if any, would have thought of the life of a disembodied soul in heaven.

But however we experience the blessing of God in our present life, and however we are encouraged now by a vision of the life to come, it will not be all roses. Having given God's undertaking, which God will honor, of abundant blessing now and in the life to come, Jesus speaks particularly, and in private, to the twelve he has previously singled out, who will follow him most closely, reminding them of what he has told them before:

Now we are going up to Jerusalem and everything the prophets wrote about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the pagans [the Romans] and he will be mocked, abused, flogged and killed. And on the third day he will rise again. (18: 31 – 33)

His disciples did not understand him. What he had told them remained a mystery to them. They couldn't understand, but events were very near which would make everything clear. He has been teaching them about a kingdom in which the great principles of power, status and money count for nothing, a kingdom to be received as a gift of mercy, with humility and the sheer trust of children, and such a kingdom is unacceptable to the powers of their society.

As Jesus approaches the final conflict, money and power come forward again as a major issue; these two, and the urgent need to be redy. But because we don't hear the gospel as it was ment to be heard, but only in

disjointed bits, we don't notice how these very pointed accounts of the conflict are leading up to the account of Jesus' death, and preparing us to understand it. We don't notice what we are being told, and we don't notice what we are not being told.

It is the gospel itself which gives us the meaning of Jesus' death. We have been shown how Jesus' teaching brought him into conflict with the authorities, and this not for abstract theological reasons, but because he undermined the importance of wealth, and the status it gave them in society; because he upheld a vision of the Law of God that threatened their use of it to dominate and control the lives and the assemblies of their people; because he would not pretend that God's rule might reaffirm the existing structures of social power.

If the usual theological interpretation of Jesus' death, the theory of atonement, which we draw from the teachings of Paul more than anyone else, were the only real and valid account of Jesus' death, or even if it were the first and controlling account, we should expect by now to hear a lot about it. But we do not. Even when Jesus, so close to Jerusalem, speaks once again of his coming death, he does not say anything like "The Son of Man must give his life to redeem the sins of Israel (or the sins of the world)" or anything at all about deflecting or appeasing the anger of God. He does not describe his coming death as a sacrifice, any more than the gospel story points towards a sacrifice. He describes it as the final confrontation with Israel's highest authority, just as the gospel story has shown him all along, in confrontation with the power and the wealth that went with authority in Israel.

Soon, in Jerusalem, he will be face to face with the temple priesthood, who stood on the heights of prestige and influence, limited only by the occupying power of Rome, but well able, as we shall see, to hold their own and even to manipulate that power. Jesus had earned the hostility of most of those who held power in the villages and towns of Galilee; now he was going up to Jerusalem, where he would clash with the priesthood, some of the wealthiest and most powerful of Israelites. And in that confrontation, he, like many prophets before him, and like many revolutionary heroes after him, would lose. He would fulfil the prophets, not just by carrying out their predictions, but by undergoing the rejection they had suffered, by dying as the prophet Zechariah had died, at the hands of the rulers of Jerusalem.

*

*

*

Jesus Kyrios

Not that the kingdom of God would fail, or that Jesus would be without his successes. As they were approaching Jericho, the last town before the road led up to Jerusalem, there was a blind man begging by the wayside, and when he heard a great commotion, he asked what was going on. They told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing, and he shouted out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" People told him to hush his mouth, but he kept on shouting louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" At last Jesus stopped and told them to bring the blind man to him. Then, as the man approached, he asked him "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord," he said, "let me receive my sight." Jesus said to him "Receive your sight. Your faith has saved you." At once the man was able to see, and he followed him, praising God, and the people who saw what had happened gave glory to God.

Once again, we are taken back to the beginning. There, the angels had given glory to God, proclaiming Jesus the Son of David; now it is the blind man, healed by his faith, who proclaimed Jesus the Son of David and now with all the people gives glory to God. This is the first time since those opening passages that Jesus has been proclaimed as the Son of David, a very public and political title, especially so close to Jerusalem where David had been king. And he does not reject it. We saw in the case of the rich man that he could reject a title given to him as a compliment, but he makes no objection to the blind man's profession of faith, even though his faith is so dangerously expressed. On his approach to Jericho, the last city before Jerusalem, he is proclaimed Son of David, and to the man who so proclaims him, he says, "Your faith has saved you." The blind man receives his sight.

Jesus is the savior of his people as their Lord and King. This man who recognises him as King and addresses him as Lord shows a faith that the rich man lacked, and by that faith, Jesus says, he is saved. The faith that saves is the faith that recognises Jesus as Lord and King. It is not faith in a doctrine about salvation, but simple recognition of the full authority of Jesus. It is like the faith of the centurion.

Further success was to follow quickly. As he passed through Jericho, there was a man named Zacchaeus, the head tax-taker for the whole town, and consequently a rich man. Zacchaeus wanted to get a look at Jesus, but he was very short and couldn't get through the crowd that pressed around him, so he climbed up a sycamore tree to get a better view. Only it wasn't a matter of him seeing Jesus, but of Jesus seeing him.

As he passed underneath, Jesus looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, get down from there. I'm coming to your house today." So Zacchaeus hurried down

and showed himself very glad indeed to give Jesus hospitality. But the crowd were quite put out. It is one thing to show proper respect to the wealthy leaders of society, but a man who was a traitor and collaborator, who made his money by squeezing his own people! How could Jesus let himself be the guest of such a public sinner?

But for Zacchaeus it was a life-changing experience. He made this public declaration to Jesus: "See, Lord, I am now giving half of my property to the poor, and to anyone I have cheated in my work I am now restoring his money fourfold." Jesus said, "Today salvation is come to this house, for this man too is a son of Abraham."

The conversion of Zacchaeus is an echo and culmination of many things in the gospel. It takes us right back to the preaching of John the Baptist, when it was the tax-takers and the soldiers who repented. It takes us back to the story of those two sons of Abraham, the rich man and Lazarus. It takes us back to the many accounts of Jesus accepting the hospitality of the rejected, the sinners shut out of acceptable Israelite society. And it takes us back to the stories of hospitality from other prominent men, who proved only half way open to Jesus, and, more than anything else, resistant to his teaching about wealth.

The story of Zacchaeus is clearly an essential part of the summing up and statement of Jesus' story prior to his engagement at last with the powers in Jerusalem. Most particularly, it is the counterbalance to the incident of the rich man who couldn't accept Jesus' teaching. At that time, Jesus had declared the impossibility of a rich person entering the kingdom of God, and the disciples had wondered whether anybody could be saved. For once, they were perceptive enough to realise that few, if any, could really be free of the desire for wealth. Jesus' answer had been, that what is impossible to men is possible to God, and this, the conversion of Zacchaeus is the demonstration of God's power over human impossibility: not that God would find a way to admit rich people into the kingdom, but that God would find a way to win even unlikely candidates away from the lure and the hold of wealth. Some people would accept what that rich man had been unable to accept.

The greatest challenge to us is to believe what Jesus has demonstrated here. For if we do, we won't take greed and selfishness lying down. We won't accept that they have to be, or that there's no other way of running the world, that we can't expect people to work or to lead or to bear responsibility unless they are allowed to be greedy and selfish; that better arrangements will have to wait for a better world in a future coming of the kingdom. For here the power of God, reaching out to a son of Abraham through the presence

Jesus Kyrios

of Jesus, touches the heart of a man made rich thru power and greed, and changes him. The kingdom of God is not waiting for some wholly future manifestation, but changes hearts and lives now in this world, and among some of its key operatives. The kingdom is coming, and as it comes it will make a difference to the way we manage this greedy, selfish, money-centered world of ours.

This day, the house of Zacchaeus has seen the salvation of a son of Abraham. We should recognise, too, what Luke is telling us, what Jesus is showing us, about salvation. There were those who looked for salvation in the meticulous observance of God's law. And there are those who look for salvation thru faith alone, believing in Jesus Christ or believing in a particular doctrine of salvation. But what we hear in the gospel given by Luke points to the unlimited scope of salvation: salvation is being included, accepted, in that kingdom of God's rule which is now breaking upon the world, a kingdom in which we are to be active and obedient, and only the attitude of trusting children, dependent on God, can fit us for it.

It is the centurion's faith and the child's trust. It is a believing response to God as God manifests his will in our world and our experience. It is not rising to meet God in some transcendent sphere of religion, but recognising God who meets us in the history thru which we are living. That is why its actual manifestation is different for different people. When Jesus was approached by the rich man, he enumerated some of the commandments and pointed to these as the way to life. He wasn't giving a false answer to test the man, but telling him the truth. If that's as far as our knowledge of God goes, a recognition of his moral demands and their authority over us, then obeying those commands will be our trust in God, by which God will bring us to life. In another case, the parable of the two men in the temple, humble submission to God consisted not in ticking off the commandments carried out, but in the tax-taker's recognition of failure, and appealing to God for mercy.

It is not we ourselves who decide at what level our encounter with God will take place, but Godself, moving towards us, who decides where our encounter with God will be and where it will take us. When the good person realises that they have done it all, keeping the law faithfully, God steps in to challenge them with a new call to faith. Just when a Christian is satisfied that they meet the requirements of faith, God will require their obedience in new works of trust in God. When Jesus saw that the rich man was looking for something more than the commandments, he saw that God was reaching him and prompting him, and that a steep challenge lay before him. Not the

step from works to faith, but from faithful works to a deed that requires total faith and trust – the step he could not take.

When Zacchaeus announces that he is giving half his property to the poor, Jesus does not demand that he give it all, but announces that salvation has come to his house. This son of Abraham has responded to God generously, believing in God, and Jesus will not belittle his offer. This is the work of salvation. This is the faith that acts, and responds obediently to God.