

Beware the Appeal to Reason

a sermon preached on the
2nd Sunday in Lent

Sunday 28 February 2010
at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Genesis 15:1-12,17-18, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

There are many perfectly sensible, plausible and reasonable justifications for avoiding Jerusalem. We recall that Luke has told us that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.”¹ Similarly, there are many perfectly sensible, plausible and reasonable justifications for avoiding the desert in which temptation by the devil is assured. We recall from last week’s gospel that Jesus “was led by the Spirit in the desert [wilderness] being tempted by the devil for forty days.”² The ordeals of diabolical testing in the desert, and even more so the fatal collision in “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it”, are surely to be avoided? Messengers of reason, who may even appear to be motivated by Jesus’ welfare, speak the perfectly sensible words of warning we may hear ourselves speak: “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”³ Even apparent enemies, “Pharisees”, can demonstrate what appears to be compassion and concern. Surely it only makes sense to heed their reasonable and sensible warnings?

The spiritual quest, which can just as well be described as the essentially human quest, is no child’s play. It is not a Sunday morning tea party, a pleasant diversion when there’s nothing worth watching on TV. It is not an exercise in philosophical speculation, nor in memorising scores of Biblical verses. As the writer to the Hebrews somewhat alarmingly declares: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”⁴ Or, as we heard in the Hebrew Scripture this morning, the experience of Abraham’s encounter with God is a “deep and terrifying darkness”.⁵ There is no room for half-heartedness or ambivalence, as Jesus declares: “The one who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and the one who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and the one who does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”⁶ To those who find sound reasons for accomplishing other perfectly reasonable duties ahead of following Jesus immediately, his words sounds astonishingly harsh to our ears: “Let the dead bury their own dead... No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”⁷ The spiritual quest is no child’s play!

So no one should underestimate the enormity of the task which the spiritual quest demands. And one should be always alert to the very many perfectly sensible reasons for avoiding its inevitable consequences. For what may sound like concern for our welfare may in fact be the greatest temptation of all. Beware the appeal to reason! After all, one can be sure that in the desert of the soul one will encounter the devil, the shadow side of the persona within each of us, whose ways are wily and whose lures are most desirable indeed. One can be sure that Jerusalem will stone those who are sent to it, and put to death the prophets. Jerusalem has always been doing that. ‘Jerusalem’ still does that, under many guises. These are spiritual certainties.

For there is bound to be resistance in the highest order to the completeness, the wholeness, the integration of opposites which is the announcement of the *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangelion*, the good news. For the status quo, in

1 Luke 9:51

2 Luke 4:1-2

3 Luke 13:31

4 Hebrews 10:31

5 Genesis 15:12

6 Matthew 10:37-38, parallel in Luke 14:26-27

7 Luke 9:60,62

the external domain of the collective as in the inner domain of the individual psyche, is bound to be threatened by the challenge to its position. Of course Herod, who represents the status quo of the old order, one-sided and unconscious, wants to kill Jesus, who represents the new humanity which is coming to birth in human consciousness! This is to be expected. Luke leaves us with a picture of a Jesus who goes to Jerusalem nevertheless, open-eyed about the realities before him in Jerusalem, conscious of the shadow side of his own nature, as we heard in last Sunday's gospel, ⁸ as well as the shadow side of the Israel which he longs to gather as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. ⁹ We can readily see the living Jesus as the source of St Paul's inspiration to "press on toward the goal for the prize of the high calling of God." ¹⁰

So the gospel alerts us to the perfectly reasonable-sounding invitations to avoid our own Jerusalem – that place in our own souls where the forces of one-sidedness, duality, unconsciousness, and self-interest reign. The appeals to avoidance are many and varied, as we are many and varied, but always reasonable-sounding. I am afraid of the risk. I don't have the time. I have a reputation to protect. I have my own plans. I prefer the comfortable limitations of where I am. Yes indeed, there are many perfectly sensible, plausible and reasonable justifications for avoiding Jerusalem. Beware the appeal to reason!

Even so, there is a great and Divine work not yet completed, a work that is calling to be done, a work which no one else can accomplish for us – not even Jesus himself! It is a work of casting out demons – or in terms which are more comprehensible in our time, a work of waking up to the presence of our own shadow, so that it might be integrated into consciousness. It is a work of performing cures – or, again, in contemporary terms, a work of healing the profound split in our psyche. And, according to the gospel, if we can ourselves turn our face to the Jerusalem to which we must go this great work will be brought to completion, to its Divinely-inspired end (**τελος** *telos*) – on the 'third day'! ¹¹

And then the 'Benedictus', which we pray together at the heart of this and every Eucharist, we will truly declare with joy: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" ¹²

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8 Luke 4:1-13

9 Luke 13:34

10 Philippians 3:14

11 Luke 13:32 *teleioumai*

12 Luke 13:35b