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## Introduction

Jesus was presented to God in the temple in Jerusalem after his birth (Luke 2:22), and every year as a child he would travel to Jerusalem with his parents to celebrate the feast of the Passover. As Jesus began his ministry, we read that the devil tempted Jesus to throw himself off the Pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 4:9). Our reading today marks a change in the focus of the ministry of Jesus as he begins his journey to Jerusalem. This is a time of increased tension for Jesus, as he travels towards the cross. We notice the impact of this shift on those around Jesus, and of both the disciples' response, and the response from Jesus. The passage invites us to reflect on how we are seen by those around us when we experience a shift in focus, especially when this shift also sees a rise in tension.

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## Text

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

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## Comment

Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem – fixed on his own destiny. He had just experienced the Transfiguration, and if Peter, James and John had ever been in doubt that Jesus was the Son of God, here is God the Father unequivocally confirming this. For Jesus, this must have been one of those 'heart-warming' experiences. Yet it was a bitter-sweet experience, for it also marks the beginning of a new chapter in the life of Jesus – towards the torment of the cross and his ultimate resurrection.

The passage presents a few different issues. The first between Jesus and the Samaritans is Jerusalem. A holy city for the Jews, yet the Samaritans do not recognise the validity of the temple in Jerusalem – and this brings us back to the classic issues of power and status that are found in many conflicts. Then there is the way in which Jesus ignores the Samaritans – so determined and focused is he on this journey to Jerusalem. Tensions between parties often begin by a person/s seeing an issue from their own perspective and not stopping to consider the view point or truth from another's experience. This causes a feeling of rejection for the Samaritans, and is an issue that carries on as we read further into our gospel reading – a rejection of those who feel a call to discipleship unless they become as focused as Jesus. We will come back to this in a moment.

And so as Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem – determined and focused – he is shunned by the very people who had been prepared to welcome him. Shunned perhaps because he was looking towards Jerusalem, shunned because he appears to ignore them.

James and John suggest retribution, commanding fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans. They do not stop to look at the situation from the perspective of the Samaritans – if they did they would have seen how they felt Jesus was ignoring, even rejecting them. Retribution is often key in the heightening of a conflict. And yet Jesus does not escalate his cold reception from the Samaritan Village, but rebukes his disciples. In this one sentence, we can see that Jesus did consider the view from the Samaritans – he knew that by turning his face and only looking towards Jerusalem it would have an impact. Yet he also knew his ultimate mission – and now was the time to shift his full attention to this. It is this shift in focus that ultimately causes the unrest between Jesus and the Samaritans.

Anyone who is familiar with tools such as stylematters\*, that consider how we personally respond to conflict, will know that when conflict escalates many people shift in their response to others. We might move from working in partnership with others when tension is relatively low, to taking charge of a situation when the conflict and differences are heightened. Or we might be very relational in our dealings with other people, but when the tensions increase, we move away and appear uninterested in resolving our differences. This shift in our way of being can cause uncertainty with others – they are used to us working and being in one particular style, and when we move away from this, it causes uncertainty to those around us.

This is what is happening with Jesus and the Samaritans. He has no less feeling for the Samaritans than in previous chapters of Luke's Gospel. And in the next chapter Jesus makes clear his feelings towards the Samaritan population with the story of the Good Samaritan. Yet the tension in his own journey is rising, and his focus and his determination now changes to his destiny – to Jerusalem and his death and resurrection, and he does not engage with others in this moment in the way that they are used to. This is what causes confusion for the Samaritans, and they respond by not receiving Jesus.

This focussed and determined outlook that Jesus now has towards Jerusalem is seen in his response to the three individuals who are testing out their calling to discipleship. To all three he gives a different reason why they may not be able to follow him. From having no base or home, to a culturally insensitive suggestion that the dead will bury each other, to not looking back at what is behind. Jesus knows that there are times in our journey that we have to consider if we are prepared to give up our security – our home; if we can break out of the demands that culture places upon us in order to proclaim the Kingdom of God; and if we can stay focussed on the journey ahead, for anyone looking back will be tempted to return to a place of safety and security when the going gets tough.

In all these three conversations, Jesus is seeing one main task to accomplish – travelling to Jerusalem and all that this has in store. In speaking about a calling to discipleship, Jesus is reminding his audience that there are times in life when we need to focus on what God has asked of us, to take care not to become distracted or to turn back.

Within this focus, with his face turned to Jerusalem, Jesus is quick not to cast rebuke on those who do not see this new shift, and on those who are unable to let go of what holds them. And yet there remains in this Gospel reading: a conflict in how Jesus engages with those around him; there remains a difference in how Jesus interacted with those before the Transfiguration; and there remains a challenge for those who journey with Jesus to stay focused when life gets tough and when it is easier to turn back than take one more step forward towards the ultimate goal.

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## Response

Spend some time with a trusted friend, and ask if they will respond to some questions about you with honesty and grace. Ask this trusted friend:

- Do I ever seem so focused on a particular task or direction, that I ignore other relationships? How does this make them feel?
  
- Do I always look like I am juggling too many priorities? Ask for their reflections if this is the case, and discuss if some areas of life should take a back seat for a while.
  
- In a time of quiet reflection, consider how focused you are on Jesus. How is this reflected to others who live and move around you?

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## Prayer

Jesus – your face is turned to me  
Turned to look at a precious child

May my eyes look always to you,  
May my words reflect the love I feel in you  
May my actions reflect the grace you show to me  
As I seek to be a person of peace  
and reconciliation in your name.

Amen

