

25.05.2017
By Pat Bennett

Introduction

Today's Gospel reading stands at the crux of the Lucan narrative of the Incarnation. In the preceding verses of the chapter, the evangelist has given his readers a dense account of the period following the death of Jesus – appearances and conversations, lack of recognition and revelation, fear, doubt, and joy crowd in thick and fast as the followers of Jesus attempt to get to grips with the new narrative they now inhabit. Now Jesus, who is also standing on a transitional cusp, takes a last journey with his disciples.

Anchor questions

How much does knowing/understanding what has happened in the past shape how we live in the present or plan for the future? Can you think of any specific examples (either personal or on a larger stage) where knowing or not knowing/understanding about the past has had significant effects? Were they positive or negative? In what way?

OR

Imagine you are having a last meeting with an individual or group with whom you have been closely connected. How would you choose to prepare them for a future in which you will no longer be travelling alongside them? Are there specific things you would like them to know or understand? How would you close this chapter in a way which helps them to move on to the next one?

Text

Luke 24: 44-53

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise

from the dead on the third day,

and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

You are witnesses of these things.

And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;

and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Comment

Like all the gospel writers, Luke has a number of distinct themes which thread through his narrative. Several of these come together in today's reading and that intersection brings out some pointers which can help us as we try to better understand how we can deal more creatively with situations of difficulty or conflict – whether great or small, private or public – in which we may be participants.

Firstly there is the *location* of the action: throughout Luke, Jerusalem looms large as Jesus' ultimate destination – the place where his identity and purpose will become manifest – and his journey towards it is a significant driver of the narrative. However in the overall trajectory of Luke–Acts, the centripetal pull of Jerusalem is replaced with a centrifugal dynamic in which what happens there becomes a force which sends those involved out from the city and into the wider world. Today's reading sits at the fulcrum moment between those two opposite dynamics and thus what happens at this point of balance has a particular potency.

Secondly there is the *language* which Jesus employs with regard to the Holy Spirit. The terminology of 'clothing' rather than of (the perhaps expected) 'filling' is significant given the way in which Luke consistently uses clothes as a marker of status whether that be heavenly nature (9:29; 24:4; Acts 1:10; 10:30); social position (7: 25; 16:19; ironic in 23:11); restoration of humanity (8:35); forgiveness and restoration to family (15:22); possession of healing power (8:44); recipient of God's provision (12:27, 28) etc. Thus the disciples need to wait to move forward until they receive the token of their changed status, and *dunamis* – the word used here for power – underlines that change with its sense of inherent power residing in something by virtue of its nature. It also – as we might infer from the fact that it lies at the root of words like dynamic and dynamite – carries a feel of an explosive enlivening, the kind needed to shift the balance from the movement inwards towards Jerusalem to outwards into the world.

Finally there is the specific *action* – recorded in verse 45 and echoing events in the preceding story (v.27) – by which Jesus prepares them, at this hinge moment, for what is to come once they have been reclothed. Questions about Jesus' true identity permeate Luke's gospel and the disciples have been on a long journey of discovery with respect to their own understanding of this. Even now, after the events of the previous few days, they are not quite 'there' and Jesus supplies the final piece of the puzzle in a way which is completely in keeping with the poetic synthesis of past, present and future which is one of Luke's hallmarks: in 'opening their minds' to what was written about himself in the law, the prophets and the psalms, Jesus helps them to find in the past an illumination of the present and thus ultimately a liberation of the future. Until they truly understand where they are, they will not be ready for the radically different future they must now inhabit, and the different dynamic of mission in a world where Jesus is no longer physically present and

specifically located.

A few verses prior to this passage, Jesus directs the attention of his disciples towards his hands and feet. There is no specific mention of scars and wounds, but we might reasonably suppose that this is the point of calling their attention there. Whilst this is in part about confirming his identity, by showing them the marks of his immediately previous experience of being tortured, Jesus also indicates that he is, in a very real sense, still connected to that and all his other experiences as a human person. Like Jesus we too may have arrived at the present moment bearing the scars and marks of conflict: the past cannot be changed but if we are willing and able (perhaps with help) to examine it, we may find that our understanding of the current situation is clarified; and that in turn might help us to move into a differently shaped future.

Response

Is there a situation of conflict or difficulty in your life/work/church where you feel stuck – unready to move forward or unprepared for what lies ahead? Take some time to recall and reflect – perhaps with the help of a trusted friend or a counsellor – on the events or interpersonal dynamics which have led up to this point, to see if they can throw light on the current situation and help you understand it better. Are there any steps you can take in the light of this to help you move forward, or to change the shape or direction that the ongoing narrative might take?

Prayer

Responsive prayer

(this could be done in association with lighting 3 candles)

One: Ascended Jesus, by your presence with us now, light up the past ...

**ALL: That, through remembering with understanding,
we may live more richly in the present.**

One: Light up the present...

**ALL: That, through seeing with understanding,
we may actively shape the future.**

One: Light up the future...

**ALL: That, through anticipating with understanding,
we may know the joy of your coming Kingdom.**

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