

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 13th March 2022
The Second Sunday of Lent

Collect

Almighty God,
by the prayer and discipline of Lent
may we enter into the mystery of Christ's sufferings,
and by following in his Way
come to share in his glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Luke 13:31-end

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus], 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." '

Sermon

My Mum has a great sense of direction. There really is no need for SatNav when she's around. Not only is she an excellent map reader, but she also has a feeling for where things are. It helps that she is quite aware of the direction of the sun as well as landmarks. Although as children we were given quite a lot of freedom to try out map reading both when we were in the car and walking, we wouldn't get very far in the wrong direction before my Mum was starting to ask questions.

I think it's fair to say that I don't follow in my mother's footsteps. I do have some sense of direction, but it is far less reliable. I love getting to know places on foot, so will often build up a picture in my mind which helps me to navigate. But I can never quite remember where the sun rises, or where it should be at different times of the day. Besides, we live in the UK where for at least 6 months of the year it's hidden behind cloud. I am one of those people who can go on the same walk, and every time I get to a place where I have gone wrong before, I can't seem to work out which way is the right way and which way the wrong way. I also have an alarming ability to convince myself that I am going in the right direction, even if I am completely wrong. Directions with me are a bit hit and miss.

What about you? I wonder whether you are happy following the directions of SatNav. Or if you still like to have a sense of where you're going. And is your sense of direction generally reliable, or does it tend to let you down?

Now it is fair to say that our physical sense of direction may well not relate to way we navigate our faith. Those who have excellent spatial awareness and are well able to navigate physically may not find an easy path in their faith. There may well be diversions along the way, not to mention the odd cul de sac. Perhaps even the sense of being lost from time to time. For me, navigating the journey of faith has been far more enjoyable than being lost – albeit that I am very used to being lost. I have also found it easier to identify landmarks in my faith than I do when driving. Somehow the world just seems to move past so quickly when you're driving – and it's always filled with cars and tarmac.

This morning's readings really encourage us to reflect on our faith journeys. To engage with the nature of them. And to ask ourselves questions about where we are, and where we might be heading.

In this part of Paul's letter to the Philippians, he is urging them to stand firm in their faith. For Paul, the Christian journey often takes the form of imitation. It's how discipleship can work, following someone whose behaviours we recognise as demonstrating their connectedness to God. Paul is under no illusion but that there are those who follow a different path, and given that he was writing at a time when followers of Jesus could face persecution, he was all too aware that what he was asking was not easy. So he appeals to the Philippians to remember their purpose. That their salvation lies in their faith. That their present suffering will be transformed.

The gospel reading is somewhat different. I wonder what you thought when you heard it read just now. It seems rather confused and confusing. First the Pharisees encourage Jesus not to head to Jerusalem, recognising that Herod is a threat. Jesus's reply suggests that he has no intention of changing direction, and that as he travels, his work will continue. And then his tone changes as he laments the situation of Jerusalem, where the prophets are killed. He expresses his longing that it were otherwise alongside a recognition of the tragic reality.

So much for the detail, but really this gospel reading is best read from the wider perspective of Luke's gospel. From chapter 9 Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem, guided by the Spirit, to fulfil his Father's will. While Luke the storyteller tells us a great deal about what happens along the way – the healings that Jesus performs; the parables that he tells; his teaching and interactions especially with the poor and marginalised – there is an inexorable sense of direction. In order to fulfil God's will, Jesus must end up in Jerusalem, no matter what.

And it is the "no matter what" that is so important in this morning's reading. From last week's reading we are aware that Jesus faced temptations throughout his ministry – just as we all do in our own ways throughout our lives. And here the temptations are as significant as ever. The Pharisees warn Jesus that if he goes to Jerusalem, he will be in grave danger. They don't mince their words – Herod wants to kill him. It's fair to say that for most of us, that would be sufficient to encourage us to at least think twice, and probably to change direction altogether. But not Jesus. Not because he is pig-headed. Not, either, because he wants to die. But rather because he is following God's will. If it was God's will that he should change direction, he would doubtless do it like a shot. But he believes it to be God's will that he should go to Jerusalem.

More than that, as his lament demonstrates, he isn't actually under any illusions but that following God's will is likely to cost him dearly. He knows the reputation of Jerusalem. And he knows that by refusing to compromise on his purposes, the consequences could be very grave indeed.

For most of us, Lent is a time when we try to align ourselves once again with God's will for our lives. When we try to find some of the clarity of direction that we see in Jesus in this morning's gospel reading. Yet perhaps you, like me, find yourself wondering how best to do that. While Jesus never appeared to divert from the path to Jerusalem, it is probably fair to say that most of our journeys have taken a few more wrong turns along the way.

And I wonder whether that's where the season of Lent is actually rather helpful to us, because in many ways it is an opportunity to take stock. While we might wish that faith could work like SatNav, telling us which way to turn at each junction, the process of discerning God's will throughout our lives is often more akin to looking back on our journey, at its twists and turns, at its loops and cul-de-sacs, and asking ourselves where it was that we felt closest to God; which decisions appear to have drawn us into a more fruitful relationship; and which seem to have taken us in the wrong direction altogether.

And then we might hope to find ourselves learning from that for the next steps in the forward direction. So our experience, when fully reflected on, can actually help to show us the way – it becomes part of the tools that helps us on our way – a bit like maps.

It's not an exact science. And it involves our whole selves – head and heart. We do have one or two things to help us – our maps and compasses, if you like. Continuing to read and absorb the words of the scriptures helps us to keep asking ourselves where we hear God's word; taking time to pray and meditate is a process of listening and growing in relationship; and we have fellow travellers along the way.

We also know that the path we are seeking to walk is one defined by love. Because that is what drove Jesus to Jerusalem – and ultimately to Calvary. A refusal to live according to any other value than love. So as we continue our Lenten journey, we do so knowing that we are held in God's love.

And as we reflect on our own experience and understand the times when God's love has been revealed to us, so we may find that we start to understand when we may have the opportunities to show that love to others as we journey onwards.

Amen.