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“As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” Luke 9: 51

Dear Friends,

You will recall that last week I reflected on a verse from Philippians 1 that counselled us thus: *“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.”* None of us ever knows exactly what lies ahead for us even if we feel like we have everything well planned out and think that we are in control of our own destiny. The last couple of weeks should at least teach us that lesson if nothing else!

I wonder, how much Jesus knew of what lay in store for him at this crux point in St Luke’s Gospel? Of course, there is no way to answer that question exactly, except to remind ourselves that he has already spoken to his disciples twice about his approaching death. So he knew his death lay ahead but did he know how, or when, or at whose hands and did he know it would not be the end of the story?

There are two things I find fascinating about our quote from St Luke. The use of the word, *“resolutely”* to describe Jesus’ attitude – I’ll come back to that in a moment. But I am struck by how Luke says, *“as the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven...”* and not *“as the time of his death approached.”* We would perhaps expect the latter given Jesus’ repeated emphasis upon his approaching death. So why does Luke miss that detail out here and look ahead to Jesus’ ascension into heaven?

I can think of two reasons – there may be others! First, Luke might be reminding us, even ahead of the fact, that Jesus’ death is not the end of the story. For people of faith, death never is the end of the story. J M Barrie put into the mouth of his most famous character, Peter Pan, the words *“to die will be an awfully big adventure!”* None of us like the idea or look forward to the prospect because deep down we wrongly believe that we are finite beings, when the truth is that while our physical bodies are indeed finite, our souls, that essential part of our character, of who we are, is welcomed into the eternal realm of the glorious Kingdom of God. Luke reminds us ahead of time, that for both Jesus and us it is merely the closing of one chapter and the opening of another in the bigger story of who we are in God. That knowledge can give us comfort, courage and strength to face the unknown future and our own sense of mortality.

The second reason I think Luke frames Jesus’ journey in the light of ascension and not death, is to remind us that our God is a missionary God. Prior to his ascension, St John records that Jesus *“breathed on his disciples and said, ‘receive the Holy Spirit.’”* He has promised never to leave them, or us alone, without the divine resources of the grace and

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power of the Holy Spirit in order to continue the missionary work of God. At his ascension, Jesus passes the baton to the disciples, who in turn pass it on to the next generation and every generation between then and now. It raises for us the questions *'how will we participate in the mission of God to make all things new,'* and *'who are we going to pass the baton of faith onto?'* These questions are perhaps more significant than ever for us to consider as we face the prospect of church life, indeed, societal and global life, being re-shaped by the current pandemic.

And so to return to that word *"resolutely."* It is a translation of the Greek phrase *"prosopon esteerisen"*, which literally means *"set his face."* It has about it the sense of a final decision – Jesus has made up his mind once and for all that now is the time to head to Jerusalem. And not just for a nice pilgrimage to see the Holy Sites or participate in the great Passover Festival. This is the moment where Jesus chooses to face his death, to be obedient to the Father, to become *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* through his own self-sacrifice. That is why we think about it throughout the two weeks prior to Easter.

But as Jesus steps forward resolutely on this journey, he immediately goes on to teach the disciples about the cost involved in following him. The cost of facing rejection, of losing reputation, of letting go of things or people we hold dear, of life changing in unexpected ways, of living more loosely with religious traditions and practices, of dying to self. Why do we have to face these costs? Because actually, often, they are the very things in which we most invest our time and energies. It is the things and people dearest to us and our own sense of self importance which most easily dislodge God from the throne room of our hearts.

Once we can learn to let go of such things and trust them to God, then we are allowing God to be God and to have the space to bring about the renewal of our souls which deep down we most long for. The journey to and through Holy Week is the great journey of *"letting go and letting God..."* It is both painful and necessary if we are to experience afresh the resurrection life of Easter Day.

So as we too move resolutely towards Easter Day, albeit in unconventional ways, I encourage you to offer your questions, your doubts, your fears, your inherited ways of practising your faith, to God – to let go of them and to trust in God's goodness, mercy and faithfulness. Allow God to take the weight of your concerns. Allow God to carry your cross to Golgotha and then just watch and wait and pray and see what God will do.

With every blessing,

Rev Tim Perkins