

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)  
(1 Kings 19:16b,19-21 / Luke 9:51-62)  
30.06.2019

In today's gospel Luke depicts Jesus and His disciples *making their way resolutely to Jerusalem*, where He is to live His *passing from this world* in the context of celebrating the Jewish Passover feast.

Very quickly this gospel text draws to our attention something all too familiar to us here in Northern Ireland, as in many places elsewhere: disputes regarding territorial rights and boundary issues, policing of interface areas and management of borders.

We are presented with a delegation from a Samaritan community refusing Jesus and His disciples right of way through their village. The Samaritan "outsiders", however, are not the only ones who were confrontational and posing threat. Two of Jesus' own companions, James and John – the pair nicknamed, *Boanerges*, which could be translated *The Thunder Boys* – were ready to *call down fire from heaven* to deal with the unwelcoming Samaritans blocking their path. These *Sons of Thunder* were ready to burn out the inhabitants of the Samaritan village that barred their entry. James and John seem to assume that one wrong justifies another. Jesus rebukes His hot-headed disciples for their *bully boy tactics*. He makes it clear that they are not to see themselves as having a God-given right to intimidate others – even those who might be considered enemies.

Jesus brought His disciples to their senses with a strange utterance: *You do not know of what spirit you are*. The Master invited those with Him to return to the true spirit of the gospel He preached – not only in word, but also by example. Clearly, those enlivened by the Spirit of God will never resort to threat or violence to impose their way – even if they consider it to be God's will.

If only Christians over the centuries lived according to Jesus' teaching! How many conflicts might never have occurred and how many more might yet be avoided?

We know from our reading of Scripture and other sources that relations between the Samaritans and the Jews were traditionally tense. Each party held to its territorial rights, insisting that its own red line was not to be crossed either way. Some geographical regions – especially along border areas which could allow convenient passage ways for one or other party – were particularly sensitive spots. Here in NI, we would call them *flashpoints*. These regions could be dangerous to visitors. Frequently, the unsuspecting passer-by was viewed as an undesirable intruder and threat to insider security. People inclined to be volatile, especially at neuralgic moments such as annual festivals. (Keep in mind the context of today's gospel – Jesus and His companions making their way to Jerusalem for the Passover celebrations.) Outbursts of violence were likely to flare out at such times. All it took to ignite fear or resentment was the hothead or trouble-maker – on one side or the other, or muscling in from elsewhere. A situation could *spin out of control* rapidly.

Jesus' word speaking into potentially conflictual situations was and remains a word of tolerance and mutual respect. For Him, violent confrontation was/is to be renounced whatever the cost.

Christ calls upon His disciples of every age and generation to know *of what spirit they are*. The true Christian spirit is *the good spirit* of generosity and graciousness, reconciliation and love.

Elsewhere in Luke's gospel account – chapter 17, we are shown how at a different time, in order to avoid being drawn into possible conflict, Jesus and His companions chose to take a longer way round. They decided it was wiser to pass along the borders of Samaria rather than venture into a region where tensions were liable to spill out. Jesus was obviously aware that a Jew would not have been safe going across Samaritan territory at that time. So he turns aside from provoking offence and risking harm for His disciples and Himself, He had the wisdom – and also the humility – to accept to walk a much longer path rather than taking the more convenient route down the Jordan valley and on to Jerusalem via Jericho.

I find it remarkable how Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, provides us with a beautiful sequel to this tension-filled story of potential conflict in and around Samaritan territory, in his contrast-account of the witness of the early Church community. Here, Luke unfolds the story of how the first Christians were dispersed from Judea through persecution, at the hands of those Jews who opposed the Christian way, considering it a threat to their traditional religious belief and practice. We see Philip venturing right into Samaria. There, *he proclaimed the Christ*. Luke describes how *the inhabitants of that place were united in welcoming the message and as a result there was great rejoicing in the town* (You can read the full story in chapter 8 of the Acts of the Apostles).

One opinion is that the village in the “sequel story” where Philip found welcome, may well have been the very one that those erstwhile hard-liners, James and John, *the Thunder Boys*, had been eager to see firebombed – before Jesus stopped them in their tracks.

Given that in Christ's own day, the word *Samaritan* was only ever used by Jews (Jesus' own people) as a term of abuse and contempt, is it not striking that Jesus Himself chose to use “*Samaritan*” as a term of praise and admiration – for example, in Jesus's moving parable about the compassion shown by a Samaritan passer-by towards the Jew who had been robbed and left for dead – (Lk. Chapter 10). More than 2000 years later we still use the term *Good Samaritan* for the kind of person who freely offers compassion and practical help to someone in need – no matter about their background.

Clearly, Jesus invites us to leave behind all tendency to stereotype others as inferior to us; to cast aside our cultural enmity, religious prejudice and blind sectarianism. There should be no space for bigotry in the heart of any disciple of Jesus.

The true Christian spirit encourages us to compromise, to open up a new way forward with those of a different party than our own... those whom we might speak of as of *the other side*.

Whoever *the others* may be in whatever our particular context today, might it not be still possible to see them no longer as enemies and rivals – but as *neighbours and potential friends*. These *others* may follow different traditions or cultural practices, but they are brothers and sisters in humanity and, for those who profess Christ, they are companions on the journey in which we are called to be one, united with them in Christ's body (and through our shared Baptism).

This common ground, this pathway that Christ has traced for us is *God's way of peace* – named so in Luke's canticle, the *Benedictus*, sung each morning in this Abbey church – *God's way of peace*.

The *way of peace* “commits” us to walk difficult roads and inconvenient distances, which from our point of view may stir up grumbling or resentment – until we remember Jesus the humble man of peace who asks us to *walk the extra mile* with each other.

He journeys with us as He did with the Emmaus travellers in whose midst He walked, leading them to the point where they could recognise Him together at the breaking of the bread.