

Luke 17 -19.10: Living the Faithful Life

If we read on to the end of chapter 19 we would have arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. So, these chapters take us on the final stages of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. In Luke this is a long journey. Jesus set his face to Jerusalem (9:51, at the end of June) and it is ten chapters later (at the end of October, 19:41) that he reaches it. These ten chapters are full of Jesus' teaching about what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus. Now, as Jesus nears Jerusalem his teaching is directed at the disciples who will be the pioneers of this task of following Jesus as the Church.

This month's readings are about faith, as teaching and as healings.

We begin (17:5-10) with faith *the size of a mustard seed* (19:6), the smallest of seeds that is strong enough to move the large, strongly rooted mulberry tree. This is an irony that perhaps sends us back to the parable of the mustard seed that grows into the tree where *the birds of the air make nests in its branches* (13:19). Our faith, however tiny has potential just waiting to be unearthed. The attached parable of the dutiful servant does not seem to follow on, but perhaps it too is speaking of the growth of faith and of potential. When the disciples have done *only what we ought to have done* (19:10), they will have allowed the tiny, but potential faith to develop into a faith that can do the seemingly impossible, but - it will not be due to their own merit. It is in the very process of following Christ that faith and its potential can grow and develop in the same way that the seed becomes the fruitful tree.

The reading (17:11-19) that follows these two parables is of the healing of the Ten Lepers. This story is found only in Luke, and continues the theme of what faith can do. All the lepers had faith in Jesus, sufficient for cleansing (curing of the leprosy). But it was the Samaritan (the outsider) who was so aware of what had taken place that he returned, gave glory to God, and thanked Jesus. The word used for thanks is not the common word, but the specifically liturgical one of *Eucharist*. This thankful leper has not only been cleansed, his faith has *healed, or brought you salvation* (the Greek word means both healing and salvation). Not only is this a story of a physical healing, it is also a story that points forward to the future role of the Church. It is in the faith that glorifies God and gives thanks (makes *eucharist*), that salvation and wholeness is received and we can be sent on our *way* (the earliest name for Christians was *followers of the way*).

Of course, we do not always live at this height of faith and our next parable (18:1-8) encourages the disciples (and us) to perseverance. Living faithful lives will sometimes feel as if we are battering our heads against a brick wall, but the question is not of whether God will remain faithful to his people, but rather whether his people will remain faithful to him.

Before Jesus' listeners (the disciples), and Luke's readers become too self-satisfied in their own sense of being faithful, Jesus pricks their bubble, by continuing his teaching with the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14). Those who are certain of their own position before God are likely to be guilty of the sin of pride. Living the life of faith requires an attitude of humility. The shock of the parable is in exactly who it is that is showing humility. Like the healed leper who is an outsider, it is the hated tax collector, treated with contempt (as a profiteering collaborator with the Romans) who knows his position before God.

And so we are led from this parable to our second "healing", the story of the tax collecting Zacchaeus (19:1-10). We do not usually view this story as a healing miracle, but the transformation of Zacchaeus' life surely is a miracle of healing, wholeness and salvation:

Today, salvation has come to this house ... For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost. _____ (19:1(1))

The word used at the end of the healing of the Ten Lepers is the same word that is used at the end of the story of Zacchaeus. Healing equals Salvation. All (outsiders as well as insiders) are called to be saved. All (outsiders as well as insiders) are called to lives of faithful following in the Way of Jesus. Faith, though the size of a mustard seed when allowed to grow can move mulberry trees and can allow *birds of the air to make nests in its branches*.

Mary Witts