

A River Through The Desert

Week 5: The Road



Overview of the Old City of Jerusalem

1 Reflection

This fifth week of the Lent study sets us on course for Jerusalem. The road to Jerusalem was well-trodden by the Jews of Palestine in Jesus's time, and before, because pilgrimage to the Holy City and to the Temple for the great festivals, was a requirement. A crux moment in Jesus's life in Luke's gospel is when Jesus 'set his face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51) and culminates in his

Triumphal Entry on what has become known to the Church as Palm Sunday.

Much has been written about the journey motif in scripture – it is a continuing theme throughout. Journey is so foundational to the Christian story of salvation that it has also become a way of understanding our entire Christian life: it is a journey from start to finish. Indeed, the concept of pilgrimage is itself a development of the idea that a journey lies at the heart of Christian experience. For a pilgrim, the final destination is deeply significant but the journey along the way is almost as important. Lent itself, from Ash Wednesday to Easter, is a journey and on this virtual Lenten pilgrimage we have come a long way via the desert, a watering hole, a mountain, the sea and here on the we can look backwards and also forwards on this road we are travelling with Jesus.

The road and the concept of a journey is a theme which reaches back into the Old Testament; it provides a template for Jesus in his ministry and also perhaps for us as Christian pilgrims. Abraham sets out from Ur and then Haran to find the land promised to him by God (Genesis 11-13). Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt, through the desert and eventually into the Promised Land led by Joshua (Joshua 1-3). The theme continues and perhaps most significantly, God opens up a road for the Jews to return from exile in



The Judean desert

Babylon to repopulate Jerusalem and Judea in the 6th century BC (Ezra 1) and described so powerfully by the prophet Isaiah when he said: 'A voice cries out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God' (Isaiah 40:3).

All of these texts and events in the Old Testament serve as part of the backdrop for Jesus's own ministry. As mentioned previously when considering the desert, the gospel writers, and especially Matthew, conceive of Jesus as a new Moses, not leading people physically from one place to another but leading them, and us, spiritually from a place of bondage (sin) to a place of freedom (salvation). When Christians come to the Holy Land on pilgrimage they want, perhaps more than anything else, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus on the road he took for us, to effect our salvation.

Each one of us will have our own sense of the journey of our life with its high peaks and, in Bunyan's evocative phrase, our 'slough(s) of despond'. For us, as for Bunyan's Pilgrim, we are drawn ever onwards to the 'Celestial City'. Perhaps many people using this study course will have experienced a pilgrimage, either to the Holy Land, or other pilgrim destinations whether near, or far from home. If so, then there is ample material for prayerful contemplation of a purposeful journey with a spiritual goal. One of my most enriching experiences of pilgrimage was along the ancient Pilgrims' Way from Winchester to Canterbury in England. That journey of 135 miles, lasting some two weeks, travelling with twelve others, taught me a great deal about the value of walking, praying and talking together on pilgrimage. The common goal of ending in Canterbury was important but actually, no less so than the daily goal of not losing our way and finding a meal and a bed at the end of each day. We found God's grace in the practical challenges as well as in the praying and story-sharing along the way.

Jesus's own journey recounted in the second half of Luke's Gospel, has been described by many commentators as 'The Road to Jerusalem'. It starts with Jesus setting his face in the direction of the Holy City and then in the ensuing ten chapters (Luke 9-19), Jesus makes a geographically circuitous, but a theological straight line, to his confrontation with the powers and authorities of his time.



A road through the desert from Jerusalem to Jericho

In his commentary, Fred Craddock suggests that the reader is 'drawn by Luke's presentation of Jesus's journey to Jerusalem into a pilgrimage with Jesus in an unfolding and deepening way, not only to the Passion but into the kingdom of God.'ⁱ For Jesus, this journey to Jerusalem reaches its peak on the donkey-riding, palm-strewn, hallelujah-singing procession into the city which 'kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it' (Luke 13:34). Jesus

is feted by the crowds as his journey to Jerusalem seemingly comes to a triumphal climax as he walks from Bethphage.



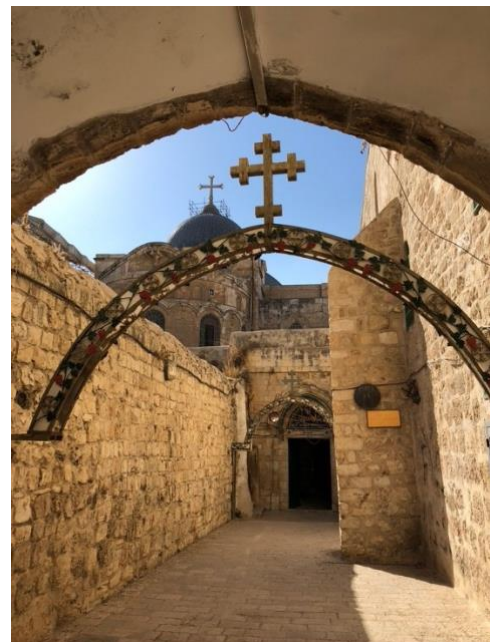
The Mount of Olives – Dominus Flevit Church can be seen top right

For many pilgrims to the Holy Land, the walk down the Mt of Olives, stopping at the Church of Dominus Flevit to remember Jesus's tears over the city, and then up the other side of the Kidron Valley into the Old City is a powerful devotional journey. This might then dovetail into walking

the Stations of the Cross along the Via Dolorosa, finally to arrive at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in order to pray at the Golgotha Chapel and then at the tomb of burial.

In any normal year, many churches would re-enact the procession into Jerusalem with a re-enactment on Palm Sunday in their own neighbourhood. In doing so, Christians seek to recapture that atmosphere of the praise before the betrayal and the passion as a way to enter into the rigours of Holy Week.

In a sense, a Lent Study, as with a pilgrimage, seeks to enable people to enter into the events of Jesus's life to help them better to understand the nature of God's gift to them and their calling as disciples following Jesus's way. A pilgrimage to the Land of the Holy One especially can help us to enter into Jesus's own journey because we can sense for ourselves, the heat of the day, the steepness of the road, the vistas from the mountaintop and the calm of the waters. But wherever we are and wherever we go, the essence of the Christian life is to gain a heightened awareness of where God desires us to be and what God calls us to do. These are the questions at the heart of our life-long pilgrimage journey, the road of faith on which we travel. The Celtic blessing puts it beautifully: May the road rise up to meet you, may the wind be always at you back; soft rains fall upon your fields and until we meet again, may God be with you.



9th Station on the Via Dolorosa

- 2 **Watch the film:** The Road (the production of this film has been delayed by lockdown restrictions. The film will be posted soon and the link to YouTube will be sent out).
- 3 **Bible reading:** Luke 19: 28-47
Read the passage once or twice and spend some time considering the details of the story.
- 4 **Questions**
 - 1 Thinking back on your life, consider some moments when the journey was hard. What was it that sustained you? In the 'sunny uplands', describe how you felt. You might like to write a short account of either, or a poem?
 - 2 Jesus 'set his face towards Jerusalem'; do you think that you have set your face towards someone, something or somewhere? How does this affect your life and your priorities?
 - 3 As Jesus walked down the Mount of Olives and saw Jerusalem, he wept over it. What do you think Jesus weeps over in our world today, in your city or neighbourhood? What difference does that make to us?
 - 4 Palm Sunday captures a mood of joy although it stands at the start of Holy Week, with the difficult days which follow. What gives you joy in the midst of the challenges of your life's journey past and present? How can we nurture that joy? You might like to write down some ideas that you can commit to for the weeks ahead, as the pandemic continues to disrupt normal patterns of life.

You might like to spend some time in prayer.

You might like to reflect further on this session and write down anything you want to hold on to.

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ⁱ Luke, Interpretation Series, Fred B. Craddock (John Knox Press, 1990)