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Let Us Go up to Jerusalem With Jesus

Biblical Reflection for 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JUNE 22, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- In the opening words of today's Gospel, Luke clearly states where Jesus is headed. He is going up to Jerusalem where, as we heard predicted in last Sunday's Gospel, he will be put to death.

Without a doubt, Jesus speaks forcefully to us about the call to discipleship, of following him. He invites all of those along the way to follow him, and there are many and varied responses to the invitation. Some will not even listen to him (i.e., the Samaritans) because they are prejudiced against the one who issues the invitation. Some respond to the invitation without fully realizing what it entails.

Discipleship is a total commitment, and Jesus wants us to know from the beginning that following him will lead to the crucifixion.

Luke's travel narrative

Luke's journey narrative is based on Mark 10:1-52, but Luke uses his Marcan source only in Luke 18:15-19:27. Before that point he has inserted into his Gospel a distinctive collection of sayings of Jesus and stories about him that he has drawn from "Q" -- a collection of sayings of Jesus used also by Matthew -- and from his own special traditions.

Much of the material in the Lucan travel narrative is teaching for the disciples. During the course of this journey Jesus is preparing his chosen Galilean witnesses for the role they will play after his exodus (Luke 9:31): they are to be his witnesses to the people (Acts 10:39; 13:31) and thereby provide certainty to the readers of Luke's gospel that the teachings they have received are rooted in the teachings of Jesus (Luke 1:1-4).

Just as the Galilean ministry began with a rejection of Jesus in his hometown, so too the travel narrative begins with the rejection of him by Samaritans (9:51-55). In this episode Jesus disassociates himself from the attitude expressed by his disciples that those who reject him are to be punished severely. The story alludes to 2 Kings 1:10, 12 where the prophet Elijah takes the course of action Jesus rejects, and Jesus thereby rejects the identification of himself with Elijah.

Christian discipleship is severe

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the severity and the unconditional nature of Christian discipleship (vv 57-62). Even family ties and filial obligations, such as burying one's parents, cannot distract one no matter how briefly from proclaiming the kingdom of God.

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Discipleship requires a wholehearted commitment to the Lord and a generous spirit of service toward his people. The demands are severe. Jesus says unambiguously: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (9:62).

The people of Jesus' time understood this agrarian imagery. The farmer has to keep his eyes fixed straight ahead, otherwise the neatly organized field required for planting would be turned into a chaotic nightmare at harvesting time. The demand sounds harsh, especially when Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their own dead." This is not disrespect for our deceased, but simply a realization that we must live without regret over the past. If we keep our eye on the present, then the fields of our lives will have the grace and freshness of newly plowed spring fields. Our lives will hold great promise for a rich harvest.

Luke also uses the journey motif to teach something about the road that Christians must walk. It is similar to the road Jesus himself journeyed, involving gross misunderstanding and rejection and requiring a great deal of internal strength and energy.

To be a disciple of Jesus requires total commitment on our part. It involves homelessness, not really belonging anywhere. To belong to Jesus must supersede all other obligations. The journey is final, its consequences ultimate. To be called does not require our perfection. Elijah, Elisha, the prophets of Israel, the fishermen of Galilee and even the tax collectors that Jesus called were certainly not called because of their qualifications or achievements. Paul says that Jesus calls "the foolish," so that the wise will be shamed. Our discipleship of Jesus must be much more than staying with him in Bethlehem, Nazareth, Bethany, Bethsaida, Capernaum, or atop Mount Tabor. It must also include being with him in Jerusalem, in Gethsemane, on Calvary.

There is no possibility of a lukewarm response; the Gospel requires all or nothing. The disciples speak the ultimate message of the Lord, "Say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'" (Luke 10:9). As signs of victory over evil, the disciples have spectacular powers, demonstrating the awesome power of God. They are to rejoice, though not in the power of God active in them or even in the success of their message: Joy comes from the promise of life that has been given to them.

We are today's disciples. Our mandate is the same: to speak by our words and deeds the love of our God, and most of all, to rejoice, because he has called us and gifted us with such abundant life.

Let's go

Today's Gospel also invites us to reflect on the journeying with Jesus in his own land, up to the Holy City of Jerusalem, not only in our Christian lives of disciples, but also as pilgrims in history. Beginning today and continuing next week, I would like to offer some reflections on the meaning of pilgrimage or holy journey.

The phenomenon of the "holy journey" was known a long time before the Christian era and precedes even the Jewish tradition of pilgrimages. Devotional trips have always been related to the ancient reality of "holy places" or "sanctuaries." Such "holy places" or "sanctuaries" were considered sacred because the places acknowledged a presence of a superior power which subsequently became an object of worship. In ancient times people journeyed individually as well as collectively to the "shrines" where they performed special acts of worship for devotional, penitential or votive reasons.

It is very likely that in the first three centuries Christians did not make pilgrimages to the Holy Land if we understand them as devotional journeys toward a holy place. It seems that a reluctant attitude towards pilgrimages in early Christianity was due to basically two factors: political and religious. The lack of recognition of Christianity, which was practically an underground life in most of the Roman Empire, was a highly discouraging fact in the recognition and veneration of holy places.

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From the writings of a Christian apologist from the second century, Justin Martyr, we learn that despite the widespread pagan custom of making therapeutic pilgrimages to the sanctuaries of Aesclepius, Christians did not practice it, because Christ was the unique healer of bodies and souls. Although these factors portray a rather negative attitude of the first Christians towards Holy Land pilgrimages, we do have some information concerning sporadic journeys. Those journeys however appear to be classified more as scholarly trips than as pilgrimages.

Tracing the footsteps

The first, as far as we know, was made in 160 A.D. by Bishop Melito of Sardis. He wanted to acquire some details about the names and order of the books of the Old Testament. Another scholarly trip was made by Origen when he came from Alexandria to the Holy Land circa 235 A.D. Before settling down in Caesarea, he decided to retrace "the footsteps of the prophets, Jesus and the Apostles."

Probably the first attested pilgrim in the real sense of the word dates back to the year 216 A.D., when a bishop of Cappadocia, Alexander (a future bishop of Jerusalem), arrived in Jerusalem to "pray and know the holy sites." Therefore, in the first three centuries, besides a few sporadic cases, we cannot talk about the practice of pilgrimages neither to the Holy Land nor to any other places.

The scenario shifted quite drastically after the year 313 when Christianity obtained the status of the legal religion of the Empire. The Golden Age of the Holy Land had begun. The Holy Land itinerary gave the origin and idea to all the other devotional journeys. It seems that the perspective of knowing the biblical sites overshadowed the previous reluctant attitude towards pilgrimages. In fact many people enthusiastically and courageously overcame the hardships and risks of long and perilous travel, and set out for a holy and exciting trip toward the earthly homeland of the Lord.

Eusebius of Caesarea, a fourth-century Christian historian, portrayed Helena, the mother of the first Christian emperor, as the noblest of all Holy Land pilgrims. Eusebius asserts that Constantine wished to be baptized in the river Jordan like Christ. We unfortunately do not know if the emperor's desire was fulfilled and whether he came to the land of the Bible. The Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena played very important roles in the life and history of God's land.

These reflections will be continued next week.

[The readings for 13th Sunday of Ordinary Time are 1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21; Galatians 5:1, 13-18; Luke 9:51-62]

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