The Journey to Jerusalem – Jesus and the Gospels

The Gospels are not biographies or histories of Jesus. That doesn’t mean that they are unhistorical (Luke 1:1-4) but that they don’t set out to provide a full account of his life. Instead they are in a literary class of their own, written as tools for sharing the Good News about Jesus (Mark 1:1. The Greek word euangelion means good message or good news. The English word gospel is from Old English good spell/tale.)

This explains why so much of the content of each Gospel takes place from the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. In Matthew, Mark and John, over 35% of the content is about what happened from that point in the story. The Gospel writers (the Evangelists) selected the stories from the life and teaching of Jesus which they saw as most useful for sharing the Good News of Jesus, and so the events surrounding his death and resurrection are emphasised as the most essential part.

Even before that, they soon make it clear that Jesus’s destiny is to go to Jerusalem to die. Immediately after Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, midway through Mark, Jesus “began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things... and that he must be killed and after three days rise again” (Mk.8:27-31; Mt.16:13-21; Lk.9:18-21).

In Luke’s Gospel (the longest by number of verses), this declaration comes particularly early, at about a third of the way into the book. After that comes the Transfiguration where Luke alone mentions that Jesus spoke about “his departure which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem” (9:31). Another prediction of his death follows (9:44). And then Luke writes, “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (9:51).

Geographically and chronologically there’s still a lot that will take place before he gets there, much of it unique to Luke’s account. The journey is referred to again (13:22,33) but the important thing is not the journey itself but that Jesus is courageously moving towards the climax of his life and the fulfilment of his work, namely his death in Jerusalem.

The Journey to Jerusalem – the pilgrim Psalms of Ascent

Psalms 120-134 are a collection of fifteen Psalms, all labelled “A song of ascents”. It’s likely that they were sung by pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem for one of the three major annual festivals (Ps.84:5-7; Ex.23:14-17; Is.30:29), though they were not necessarily composed for that purpose. They may have been used in regular worship too.

The collection itself was probably put together after the Exile. Some of these psalms express personal heartache and homesickness about being far from the Temple, and others reflect the active opposition to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple after the exiles returned. “Despite the frustrations and disappointments, these little psalms all breathe a quiet, undaunted faith in Israel’s God” (John Stott).

The aim of this Lent course is two-fold. First and foremost, we will follow the Lord’s journey to Jerusalem, reading through Luke’s Gospel from 9:51 through to Easter. Please use the daily readings for each week as indicated in this booklet, and make time to reflect upon them.

Each Thursday evening we will focus on the particular story which our readings bring us to for that day. There will be a short talk about that passage by one of the ministers of the Saltburn churches. The speaker in Weeks 1 & 4 will be Rev. Adam, in Weeks 2 & 5 Rev. John, and in Weeks 3 & 6 Rev. Ricardo. That will be followed by discussion.

In the second part of our Thursday evening meetings we’ll look at one of the pilgrim Psalms of Ascent and think how that connects with both the Lord’s journey to Jerusalem and also with our own pilgrimage, as we journey through this world to the heavenly Jerusalem. Rev. Geoff will share a few thoughts on the Psalm, leading into further discussion.

Each evening will end with a short time of reflection, asking God to write on our hearts those things which he has impressed upon us, and which will help and equip us to follow Jesus all through life’s journey.