

Proper 8, Year C

Today's gospel story comes shortly after the transfiguration story. If you remember, Jesus goes up the mountain and the disciples see him on top with Moses and Elijah, figures from the past. Peter suggests building shelters on the mountain for these three, as if to keep them there, to anchor them to that place. It didn't happen. Then soon afterwards, we have Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem.

I've talked before about faces, and the need to remove our spiritual cosmetics so that, like Jesus, we see clearly and the world sees us as we are. I've talked before about Jesus coming down from the mountain with a shining face, and of people whose faces light up when they are doing what they were put into the world to do. But today I want to explore another aspect of that expression. *Setting his face to go to Jerusalem* – it tells of determination, resolution, maybe even pigheadedness. According to the gospels Jesus knows what will be facing him, and he does not flinch. Twice we're told in today's reading that he 'set his face toward Jerusalem'. He had to steel himself for the fate that awaited him in the city that killed her prophets. You can imagine how tempted he might have been to turn back. But instead having acknowledged the past, and brought it with him—Moses, Elijah on the hilltop—he refuses to look back and dwell on it.

Later in today's gospel, his mates encourage Jesus to punish the village that refuses to receive them. Instead he tells his disciples to move on—what's done is done. How often do we obsess about the past, going over it again and again, making ourselves cross and embittered?

Our literature is full of warnings against 'looking back'. In the Greek myths, Orpheus went to the Underworld to seek his dead wife, Eurydice. He was allowed to take her back to the land of the living on condition that he would not gaze upon her until they reached the 'upper air'. But he looked back and in a flash she vanished. In Genesis, the Lord warns Lot, Abraham's son, to flee with his wife and children from Sodom and not to turn their faces back toward the destruction that will follow. Lot's wife looked back, and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Jesus' comment that foxes have holes and birds have nests, but that he has nowhere to lay his head is not to be interpreted in a self-pitying way—oh woe is me. Far from it, it's a celebration of the fact that he is not tethered to anywhere or anyone except the Divine will, and he goes where that takes him.

That's a message for us: to go where the Divine will takes us, not necessarily where we think we should be going.

Being the vicar of these three parishes is not what I imagined being a vicar would be like. I imagined a single church where I could say my prayers with the vicarage next door. I imagined the vicar and the church being in the middle of the wider community. The place where the church and I are part of the wider community is the village over there—and it's not where I live. I imagined a whole load of other things too that used to be true in the CoE but no longer are. After just a few weeks as a curate, I soon came to realise that I had to deal with the situation as it is, not as I might have wished it to be, or as I knew being a vicar used to be in the old days. I had to, and have, set my face to go forwards, starting from *here*, not from *there back then*. That is what we all have to do as we plan for the future. As it says in Ecclesiastes 10.7: do not ask why things were better in the old days—it's not an intelligent question. As I've said so often before, we often wish to relive history as if it hadn't already passed away, and so we fail to live in the present.

Looking back leads to the evaporation of what we most desire, or our being turned into something as hard as stone. Neither leads to eternal life. Looking back is sometimes our solution to the fear we experience by looking ahead. However much we may wish otherwise, evasion is never a good thing. We must confront reality now and work with that. We must steel ourselves—set our faces—for what's coming rather than bury ourselves in the past. As Jesus says: leave the dead to bury their dead.

The past can be a refuge only because it is easily manipulated by our present desires. We imagine we have control over it. The kind of control that the two disciples in the Gospel try to exercise is the control of time. 'Let me do this first, then I'll join you,' they say to Jesus. Like Orpheus with the gods, these would-be disciples try to bargain with Jesus about time. We do just the same with our diary-driven lives. Each of us bargaining our time. It's our *own* diaries, our *own* agenda, that make us unfit for the kingdom of God. We want to be part of it, we pray for it to come, but only when *we're* ready for it and only when *we* have the time for it. Jesus is not bargaining or controlling. His face set toward Jerusalem, toward what was to come.

He teaches us to say 'thy kingdom come', but we need to remember that that kingdom is not in the past, behind us. It's ahead of us still. And we have no chance whatsoever of being fit for it unless we put the past behind us and start planning for the future starting from where we actually are.