

## RETREAT AT ILKLEY: TALK ON SATURDAY MORNING

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Today we are going to consider some stories from the Gospel of Luke: the first one is the arrival of Jesus in his home town. This is the way Luke chooses to introduce the work of Jesus' ministry.

### **Luke 4: 16-30**

You can see two things immediately: first, the impact Jesus makes on his listeners - they are impressed by the beauty of what he has to say. But what, after all, does he say? Only this: that the beautiful promises expressed by Isaiah *are being fulfilled even as they listen*. Look more closely at what the prophecy says: *The Lord has anointed me....*: if this is being fulfilled *today, even as we listen...then this man is claiming to be the Messiah! This message is completely personalised: all that God has promised is to do with his anointing of ME!* As the astonishment begins to deepen, Jesus hears the voices of those who remember him as a boy: they cannot believe that the hopes of Israel have come so close to them. But if Jesus' words are false, then he is near to blasphemy. He reminds his hearers that they are reacting badly, and that it would not be the first instance of rejection for a true prophet; because this is Luke writing, he reminds them that pagans may accept God where Jews reject him. And then comes the dreadful foreshadowing of the Crucifixion, as Jesus is rushed *out of the town and up the hill* to die.

The crisis is somehow averted. But why does Luke start his account of Jesus with such a questionable story? Surely we should first see Jesus succeeding, wowing the crowds, healing the sick, setting the seeds of his movement! Instead, we find him, even in his home town, coming badly unstuck, and having to leave for his own safety. Here he is, at the beginning of his life: a failed evangelist.

We can try to explain why the locals give him the bird. Perhaps they wanted something very specific from him: *do us some miracles* sounds almost commercially-motivated; certainly they are looking for something narrowly self-interested. Jesus shows himself immediately as not limited to local interest: his vision of what he is about is enormously free, as wide as the world. So we are faced from the beginning with the meeting between an extraordinarily free spirit, and narrowly local, selfish motives. That is a good starting-point for our reflections. Many of our ills and sufferings are down to the limited way we interpret the world, our modern habit of setting ourselves at the centre of the universe, and sitting in judgment on the quality of our life. Jesus fails the expectations of these local people, who sat in the synagogue with all their eyes fixed on him: he claims too much for himself, and they are not interested in the horizons of God, but only in their own motives.

In the body of the Gospel we find this incomprehension, not only in those who are defined as enemies, but even in the followers of Jesus. When he announces to them that he is going to be crucified, they are horrified, and begin to devise all kinds of escape-routes for him. Jesus escaped (we don't know how) from that lynch-mob in Nazareth; but he will not escape from his destiny in Jerusalem. Still, his disciples are

represented to us as *never* understanding, always on the look-out to save Jesus from the Cross. By the time the Gospels come to be written, this is shorthand for the great judgment, the fundamental option of our human life: will you go to the Cross, will you carry the Cross with Jesus, or not?

Christians should not attribute such feelings to the Jews, and assume that they have given the Cross its proper place in their lives. The Gospels are Christian writings, and Luke is a Gentile like us. He knows that we have the same difficulty in accepting the Way of the Cross, and that we will be as good at devising escape-routes as anyone. We want to share the liberating vision of Jesus, the marvellous breadth of his love for humanity. But we don't really see where the Cross fits in. It's about death, and we aren't going to die for a long time. When it comes, no doubt we'll be ready for it, but not now. Now is for living.

This is a pity, because Jesus is the great lover of life. In his book, loving life means the Cross. They aren't contradictory: they go together. The ones directed towards death are those who can only conceive of life as a possession, as a self-centred complex of motives and projects which bring my happiness, my fulfilment. He does not insist on the coming Cross because he has an unhealthy fondness for being tortured, or because he despairs of ordinary happiness. He insists on the Cross because it is the threshold you have to cross in order to reach life. He senses the limits of the desires of the people in Nazareth, and he wants to transcend them; he knows that they will not come with him, because they cannot believe the carpenter's son is the Christ, and that is because they cannot believe that they are the people of God, and that will prevent them in the end from *being* the people of God. Jesus will die, if you like, impaled on their disbelief in him or in themselves or in the promises of God.

We too die of our inability to believe. But *the facts do not change*, whether we believe or not. Unbelievers all meet the Cross, and find themselves beside believers in dole queues, bankruptcy proceedings, cancer wards, road accidents, divorce courts, and morgues. Believers and unbelievers are equally robbed, deceived, and betrayed, raped and murdered. It is really to this that the Gospel of Luke speaks in its resurrection story.

### **Luke 24: 13-35**

In this story of the risen Jesus there is tremendous irony, because he is walking along the road beside two people who have in some way reached the depths of the grave. The bottom has fallen out of their particular world, and they are staring bleakly at the ruins. Their faces are described as the same as those in Matthew 6 - "When you fast, do not *pull long faces*"; these people are walking beside the Resurrection, and their faces are funereal. Jesus screws them down still further, asking him the cause of their miserable argument; and then they simply and methodically rehearse the story of the Paschal Mystery, in exactly the terms which will form the Gospel proclamation in the Acts of the Apostles: the vocabulary is precisely the same. Here the irony starts to teach us, or rather the risen Christ begins to teach us how ironic we are. We should look at the whole question: *What are you struggling with so anxiously as you go along your road?* My bet is, that if you have the courage to go away this morning and examine exhaustively everything that gives you anxiety, perplexity, uncertainty, lack of faith, hope, or love, you will end up with the same long face and the same incongruous mind that Jesus discerns in the two disciples. In other words, you will be ready to inscribe in

the school of Emmaus, the school which lights a fire in the heart as the true meaning of the Scripture is opened up, and which brings its students to the breaking of the bread, and the joyous recognition that suffering is written for the Christ, and that this sad journey away from the city of peace is to be reversed in every sense. Do you see how accepting the Cross with love and with an expectation of wisdom, an obedience to God, has turned the disaster itself into the key which unlocks the mystery, and makes the heart burn with love? That, if you like, is an experience which deserves the name "conversion"! So let us do it today. Let us draw out everything we can find of pain and anxious uncertainty, loss and disappointment, and measure it *not* against the worldly scale of self-centred "happiness" or success, but against the story of the Cross which Jesus was alone in accepting.