

“A Mind Set on God”

Back in 1987 George Harrison, the quiet Beatle, did a cover version of a song called “I’ve Got My Mind Set on You.” I did not know this was a cover version as I was not aware of the original from 1962 by a singer named James Ray. His version has a calypso feel to it. And for anyone who is a fan of cowbell you get it from beginning to end. I think more cowbell would be impossible unless there was a cowbell choir. The reason I bring this song is because it is the closest we get in our current language to the strange expression Luke uses in this Gospel reading. It is an expression that strikes me as rich and powerful every time I read it. That is when Luke writes, “When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

We may set our mind on something but we don’t set our face do we? If you will, please stand up for a moment. Now imagine that you have set your face to Washington, DC. What would your stance look like? [Wait for all to orient themselves.] As I look around I see that many of you are not just looking in the direction of Washington you have actually reoriented your body even in these narrow pews toward DC. [you may sit.] It seems to me that when Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem it is more than just a matter of looking in the ordinal direction of it. It is even more than setting his mind on it. He orients his body and all of his being toward Jerusalem.

Jesus is not just thinking I would like to go on vacay to Jerusalem. Or I hear that they have good sushi in Jerusalem let’s check it out. Neither is he suggesting to the disciples that Jerusalem has a great arts scene worth checking out. Jesus has in this moment reoriented his whole life to Jerusalem. There is nothing else that matters but getting to Jerusalem and accomplishing his mission there.

When James and John get annoyed at a Samaritan town for not welcoming them (they are supposed to be welcoming to travelers in their culture), they want to send fire and fury down to destroy it much like Sodom and Gomora. Jesus brushes it off and continues on his way. Nothing else matters but getting to Jerusalem. Jesus is single minded in the matter.

On their journey Jesus and company encounter several people who want to follow or he calls to follow him. He has harsh words for each of them. He tells the first that following him is hard for, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

He calls another one to follow, but this one asks for permission to first bury his father, the fifth of the Ten Commandments by the way. Jesus responds that the dead in spirit can do the burying, but this one must proclaim the life giving news of God’s Kingdom. This must have been shocking to his hearers.

The last person Jesus encounters just wants to tell his family he is off to follow this rabbi, but even this is too much for Jesus. He compares the man to a farmer who looks back while plowing. Thus he will be unable to direct his oxen to plow a straight furrow (of course there also are echoes of Lot's wife in looking backward).

When Jesus called you and me to become his followers I think we took it like the ones in this passage. Following Jesus was to be easy and on our terms not on God's or Jesus' terms. If we had other desires or needs we put those first. That is not the Jesus way. Indeed, he requires us to reorder our thinking putting God before all else. This has surprising implications for each of us.

If we listen to Jesus he might tell us the way he told the rich young man that he was to sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor in order to follow him. He might tell us that we are to leave a career and tend to the sick in Calcutta or the asylum seekers at our borders. Despite our fears he might call us to begin ministering to the imprisoned. He might ask us to join a ministry that protests the building of pipelines through impoverished counties, or go minister in undeveloped nations where violence and disease are rampant. Who knows what kind of uncomfortable, unimaginable, or shocking thing Jesus might want of us.

We are called to ask, called to listen to his response, and called to act. We need to trust in God that we will be OK. It took St. Francis many years and some dramatic encounters with Christ to realize that he was to give up all that he had as a comfortable son of a merchant and become a friar. He became the laughing stock of his town for renouncing his comfortable life. Even when his ministry caught fire he was deemed dangerous by the church hierarchy. When he went to broker peace between the warring Christians and Muslims he was deemed foolish by all sides.

His reward for his ministry was the gift of the stigmata. That is one terribly painful and debilitating gift. He suffered the same wounds as the crucified Jesus. He accepted them as a gift. Yet his impoverished and painful life was filled with joy beyond measure because he followed Christ.

Most of us are not called to so dramatic a change, but we are all called to follow Jesus. Do not be afraid to pray and listen for God's call. Discern with your fellow Christians what the call means. Then follow Jesus. It is why we are given life and it is the most fulfilling life to lead.

Trust in the Lord for that is the path to abundant life now and in the age to come.