

LUKE 13:31-35  
DETERMINATION

Has there been a time when your determination has shone through? A time when you've been determined to see something to the end? A time when you've had to have the courage of your convictions? A time when the odds were stacked against you, but you have kept going? A time when others have questioned you about what you're doing, but you've kept going to the end? Or did you give in? I was reading the other day about an experiment: some student volunteers were shown three lines of varying lengths on a page and were asked questions about these lines; which was longer etc. 95% of the students answered every question correctly. Then some actors were planted in the group and were told to give the wrong answers deliberately and with great confidence; the number of students who gave the right answers fell to 25%; 75% of students went along with the wrong answers knowing them to be wrong! This is all about the pressure to conform; we find it hard to stand out from the crowd; our determination is tested when we seem to be going a different way from everyone else, when the group says we should be doing something else.

There was a TV advert some years ago for BT; it featured Maureen Lipman who was trying to buy a set of white goods, a washing machine, dishwasher and the like. Every time she was in a shop and found something she liked, Mrs Jones had already bought it! Finally, she found an appliance that Mrs Jones had not bought and if it wasn't good enough for Mrs Jones, then Maureen Lipman didn't want it! This is the power of conforming! This ad was amongst the first to sow the seed of an idea in our minds that you could do your shopping over the phone; it has since developed into online shopping. Who decides what we do and how we behave? Peer pressure has a huge influence on us, young and old! Or is it the cultural norms of our society? Are we persuaded by advertising campaigns? What place does our faith have in shaping these lifestyle choices? How does Jesus set us an example for how we are?

Today's story about Jesus is one that I've not preached before; it is one of these in-between stories that gets overlooked as we go from one bigger story to the next. It gives us an insight into Jesus' character and His determination, qualities that would lead Him to the cross and to the place that would define Him forever. Without these qualities the cross would never have happened and something would have failed along the way. He needed the determination we see today to get there! But this is about more than a simple sense of human determination; this is about someone ready and willing to do God's will and walk in the Lord's way come what may; is Jesus an example in that for us too?

The story is in two parts. The first part is Jesus' meeting with some Pharisees and the second is His concern for Jerusalem, perhaps sparked off by the comments about where He will die! It begins with some Pharisees: did Herod send them on this mission? Was he trying to intimidate Jesus? Was he trying to make Him afraid so that He would run away into hiding? Was Herod trying to make Him go away just as he had tried to make John the Baptist go away, but not prepared to do to Jesus what he had done to John earlier? Or were these Pharisees acting on their own initiative hoping to get into Herod's good books? For whatever reason: "*At that...*" (Luke 13:31) By their attempt at intimidation, sowing seeds of doubt and fear they were trying to make Him give up the work He was doing because they and Herod didn't like it.

But it would take more than threats to make Jesus go away: "*Go tell...*" (Luke 13:32f) "Today, tomorrow, and the third day" are not to be taken literally, but to give the sense that Jesus has a time to work, but there will come a time when that will change; the third day will be a different day, a day in Jerusalem when He will reach His goal. His determination is to reach that goal and nothing will push Him off track. His goal was the cross; this was where He was going, to Jerusalem to die on the cross and there is some sense in His heart that Jerusalem was the right place, the appropriate place to die; He longed for the people of Jerusalem to respond to

Him, but knew that it would never be like that. “O Jerusalem...” (Luke 13:34) They were a people who didn’t want to know, but Jesus is determined to finish the course.

Here are two very different attitudes to the kingdom of God! The people of Jerusalem couldn’t care less about God and His kingdom; Jesus tries to win them, to care for them, with the picture of the hen sheltering her chicks from the storm or the fire, protecting them, saving them. But these “chicks” don’t want to know, running about all over the place while their greatest crisis is coming and the door to salvation is about to close! On the other hand, Jesus is determined to live in God’s kingdom to the very end: God has given Him a task, a mission, to be the Saviour of the world; the goal, the end of that mission is the cross outside Jerusalem and that is where He will go; nothing will distract Him, nothing will put Him off; He will go there because that’s what God wants Him to do. Jesus is determined to be what God wants Him to be, and to do what God wants Him to do.

Determination? Is that a quality we have? What are determined to be or to do? How does that determination fit with our faith? Jesus was determined to be what God wanted Him to be, to do what God wanted Him to do. Is that our determination? When the kingdom of God is in our hearts then that should shape the way we think about life, about ourselves, about our relationship with God. When Jesus is Lord, that should shape us in all sorts of ways: what kind of person, spouse, parent, grandparent, office-worker, neighbour, friend, volunteer, Christian will we be – shaped by being what Jesus wants us to be and do what Jesus wants us to do! We talk about doing God’s will, but we know that we’re not very good at it. I came across this sometime ago: “I do not always do the will of God, but I want to want to!” Are we inspired to *want* to be this kind of person? Are we determined to be like this for as much as possible? Is that our determination?

So what gets in way? Christians in some parts of the world for whom their determination to live the kingdom of God is challenged by the very same kind of intimidation as Jesus faced. Christians in Pakistan, for example, are told to stop being Christians because other people don’t like it; some are ostracised by their families for their Christian faith, all to make them afraid and give up following Jesus. Teenage Christians at school need to be determined to live by their faith, because at times they are bullied for being different; peer pressure is such a powerful thing – we laugh at the BT advert, but there are people whose lives are made a misery by being pressed to fit in and be like everyone else. Adults in the workplace are laughed at for trying to live by Christian principles instead of following the herd. Sometimes, life gets in the way: our determination to follow Jesus is challenged by the events of our lives, the times when things are hard and our sense of God is changed; the determination we once had to live a Christian life becomes weaker and we drift. Even the church, the place where we’re supposed to find mutual support and encouragement, can challenge that very determination by the surprising way that Christians sometimes behave towards one another. We become like the people of Jerusalem: we don’t want to know Jesus and His love, and we run in any direction rather than come to Him.

Citizenship is a big issue in our world. Where do we belong? If you were born in Europe and have come to the UK to live, even taking UK citizenship, that sense of belonging is under a cloud. This is why the Church is concerned to support people through Brexit; this is why I put up posters offering the church as a place to talk, to find help and support for people who are frightened, anxious, and whose sense of citizenship is under threat. Philippi was called “little Rome” and the people who lived there were citizens of Rome with all the privileges that came with that; they were a proud people; they had a sense of belonging to the greatest city on the planet at the time. But Paul says of the Christians in Philippi, and by extension of us, “*Our citizenship...*” (Philippians 3:20) That’s where we belong; we belong in God’s kingdom; we are God’s people, Jesus is Lord, the Saviour, God is our Father. Paul has already described the athlete and pressing on and winning the prize – all pictures of determination and effort; he finishes with these words of encouragement and challenge: “*therefore...*” (4:1)

We are inspired to stand firm by this sense of who we are! We belong to Jesus; we are His friends, we are God's children and He is our Father. Nothing can change that, not other people's opinion, not changed circumstances, not our doubts and questions, not intimidation from others. We belong with Jesus; we are His. Let that inspire us to stand firm, inspire us to be the people that God wants us to be and do what God wants us to do. "I do not always do the will of God, but I want to want to!"

Determination is a quality to be valued! Jesus' determination was to be the person God wanted Him to be and do the things God wanted Him to do and He would not be pushed off. Can we be like that? It is hard to be like that, to be determined in the face of life that would challenge it. It is hard when people are telling us we're wrong or stupid; or that our faith is out of date and irrelevant; or when the impulses in us, our instinct is to give up and have a quiet, comfortable life just pleasing ourselves! Will we have the courage of our convictions? What are we determined to be or to do?