

## The Christian Journey – Sermon 6th September 2015

**Reading: Joshua 24:1-21** The Covenant Renewed at Shechem

*Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.*

<sup>2</sup> *Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. <sup>3</sup> But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, <sup>4</sup> and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt.*

*“Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. <sup>6</sup> When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. <sup>7</sup> But they cried to the LORD for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the wilderness for a long time.*

<sup>8</sup> *“I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. <sup>9</sup> When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you. <sup>10</sup> But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.*

<sup>11</sup> *“Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. <sup>12</sup> I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you—also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. <sup>13</sup> So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.’*

<sup>14</sup> *“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup> But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”*

<sup>16</sup> *Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! <sup>17</sup> It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we travelled. <sup>18</sup> And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.”*

<sup>19</sup> *Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. <sup>20</sup> If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”*

<sup>21</sup> *But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”*

## Introduction

Did any of you watch the Money programme presented by Anne Robinson

- It contained an interview with someone from the Chatham Food Bank.
- I thought it was quite interesting, looking at different attitudes to money.
- At one point Anne was talking to a woman who couldn't understand why someone would try to pay off their mortgage quickly
- Her attitude was "You should enjoy your money while you've got it"
- Why worry about the future. You might not live to enjoy it
- She said "Yesterday is the past, Today is the future"

It wasn't so much the attitude to money that struck me

- But the attitude to life.
- Life is about now.
- It is not about where we are going
- But about our experience today.

I think there has been a cultural shift

- In the past life and faith was understood as a journey
- Today it is often understood as an experience.
- And I'm sure this affects us Christians as well
- Is church just about an experience of God
- Or is it more and also a step on a journey with God?

The idea of faith being a journey is written into the very fabric of our churches

- If you think of a traditional church.
- You enter through the door at the back where you find the font.
- Baptism being the symbolic start of our Christian life.
- Then we move into the Nave, the main body of the church.
- Nave being the same root word as 'Navy'
  - Because In the Middle ages when these churches were built
  - Boats were the only method of transporting large numbers of people

The symbolism continues

- As the congregation journeys together through the Nave
- Towards the High Altar – the holy place where God resides
- Bible Characters and saints look down from the stained glass windows to inspire us
- The pulpit is to one side for the word to encourage us on our way
- But we can only reach it by passing the 'Rood Screen'
- This is an image of the cross. That hangs above the choir area.

So the Gospel is contained in the architecture

- The Christian journeys towards heaven but can only get there through the cross.
- I think it's J John who says
- "If you want to get to heaven you have to via King's Cross.

## Pilgrims Progress

Last weekend we visited my Sister

- The afternoon we arrived she suggested a nice walk
- “Let’s go to the Slough of Despond” she said
- That sounds nice – A slough is like a bog or marsh and despond as in despondency
- So was she inviting us to the Bog of Discouragement or the Marsh of Misery!

Actually, it wasn’t bad at all. It was a little nature reserve in Bedfordshire

- It was marsh land but now has nice dry footpaths to walk around it.
- But the name ‘Slough of Despond’ comes from a book called Pilgrim’s Progress.
- Actually it rejoices in the snappy title: *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come; Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream*
- But Pilgrim’s Progress sounds better
- Written in the 17th century by John Bunyan whilst in prison for preaching without permission.
- And is considered to be an English Religious literary Classic
- Which means it’s one of those books that everyone says they know
- But nobody has actually read.

I mention it is because it’s a perfect example of the idea of Christianity as a journey.

- It is an allegory – a story which is a picture of a greater truth
- This story is about a man, rather subtly, called Christian,
- Leaving his home town called “City of Destruction” (This world) and journeying to the Celestial City, (or heaven).
- On the way he comes across many obstacles which are based on many Bedfordshire landmarks,

It begins with Christian weighed down by a great burden.

- The knowledge of his sin learned from reading the Book (Bible).
- It is so unbearable he looks for deliverance and is directed to follow the shining light to the wicket gate by a man called Evangelist.
- So off he sets, some friends called obstinate and pliable try to dissuade him
- But he carries on only to fall into the slough of despond where his friends desert him
- And he gets stuck in the mire of doubts, fears temptations, lusts, shames, guilt and sins. (Which is where I went on my holiday!)
- Fortunately Christian is rescued by Help and sent on to the firmer ground of the Wicker Gate.

But poor Christian gets lost again and is deceived by Mr Wordly Wise into seeking deliverance through the law

- Fortunately Evangelist turns up and sets him straight
- The law is the way of slavery and he carries on to the wicket gate
- Which is the entrance to the ‘Straight and Narrow’ King’s Highway
- Where despite arrows from Beelzebub’s castle reaches the ‘Place of Deliverance’
- Where Jesus frees him from his burden

But this is only the beginning of the story

- Christian must carry on to reach the Celestial City
- He receives gifts of peace, new garments and a passport to the celestial city
- And off he sets again
- He meets three men called Simple, Sloth and Presumption who spurn his attempts to help them
- He struggles over the hill of difficulty after refusing the easier roads called danger and destruction.
- He meets weak fellow pilgrims Mistrust and Timorous who are afraid to go on
- But with the help of Watchful the porter comes to house beautiful, a house provided by God for the refreshment of pilgrims

He leaves there clothed in the armour of God

- Fights the evil dragon Apollyon in the valley of humiliation
- But overcomes with the sword of the spirit
- He is encouraged by the 23rd Psalm as he passes through the valley of the shadow of death

At Vanity Fair, where all the worldly delights are for sale, he and another pilgrim, Faithful are arrested.

- Faithful is executed for his disdain for this world
- And thus takes a short cut by chariot straight to Celestial City.
- Christian carries on past the temptations of money at the silver mine of Lucre.
- He is captured by the Giant despair and imprisoned in doubting castle
- But manages to escape using a key called Promise

He is tricked by the flatterer into thinking he is an angel of light and caught in a net

- Encouraged by sight of Immanuel's land from Delectable Mountains
- He refuses to believe Atheist who tells them The Celestial City does not exist
- And eventually crosses the river of death to reach the city.
- He is allowed in but a companion called Ignorance is refused entry because he thought he could get in by his good deeds rather than by free gift of God.

In part two Christian's wife and children also become pilgrims and follow a similar journey

- Demonstrating heroism is for women and children too.
- At the end his four sons don't cross the river but remain to assist the church.

It's a great book

- Despite the old fashioned English
- And helps us see the idea of our journey of faith.
- John Bunyan himself faced many hardships.
- Spending many years in prison for preaching the gospel.
- But as he says in the book
- *"Dark clouds bring waters, when the bright bring none."*

## The Israelites Journey to the Promised Land

If we now turn to the passage we read at the beginning

- At the end of Joshua's life he summons all of Israel together
- And God speaks to them
- He reminds them of their journey to the promised land
- Reminds them of His call to Terah and Abraham to leave their own country and go to a land God would show them.
- Of His promise to Isaac and Jacob.
- Of the deliverance from Egypt.
- How He brought them across the Red Sea
- And eventually brought them into the Promised Land
- Driving out the people before them.
- Saying in verses 11-13 (Joshua 24)
- *"I gave them into your hands. <sup>12</sup> I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you..... You did not do it with your own sword and bow. I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant."*

He only briefly mentions how they 'Lived in the wilderness for many years'

- We know this was because they were too afraid to enter the Land with Moses
- We read in Deuteronomy 1:31-33  
*In the wilderness. There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place." <sup>32</sup> In spite of this, you did not trust in the LORD your God, <sup>33</sup> who went ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go.*

So God made them wait until they were ready to receive his promise.

- God also told Moses he too could not enter the promised Land
- If we read on in verse 37-38 (Deuteronomy 1)  
*Because of you the LORD became angry with me also and said, "You shall not enter it, either. <sup>38</sup> But your assistant, Joshua son of Nun, will enter it. Encourage him, because he will lead Israel to inherit it."*

The events of the Israelites journey can also be seen as an allegory.

- As they lived out their lives in the wilderness they become a picture of the Christian journey
- They leave Egypt, the world
- They cross the Red sea as we come through the waters of baptism
- God leads them through the wilderness as he leads us through our lives
- Till we cross the Jordan in death and arrive at our promised rest.

Moses, the lawgiver could not bring the people into the Promised Land

- But Joshua – the Hebrew name for Jesus – could bring them into the Land
- Just as we too can only be saved by faith in Jesus – not through obeying the law.

## Our Spiritual Journey

So what about us?

- Do we recognise ourselves as on a journey
- Can we look back and see how God has called us?
- Set us free from the snares of this world.
- Given us new life as we come through baptism
- Been with us and helped us through good times and bad.
- Do we look in hope towards our final goal
- That place of rest and rejoicing.

In Hebrews chapters 3 & 4 the writer compares our journey to that of the Israelites

- It is well worth reading
- He compares their refusal to enter the Promised Land with our destiny of Heaven
- As a warning against unbelief
- In Hebrews 3:7-9 we read  
*<sup>7</sup> So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness, <sup>9</sup> where your ancestors tested and tried me, though for forty years they saw what I did.*
- He goes on in chapter 4:1-3 & 11-13  
*"Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. <sup>2</sup> For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. <sup>3</sup> Now we who have believed enter that rest,*

*<sup>11</sup> Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.*

*<sup>12</sup> For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. <sup>13</sup> Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

## Conclusion

I guess we have to end with the challenge Joshua gave the people of Israel

- In Joshua 24 (vs. 14-15)  
*"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup> But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."*

The people answer they will serve the Lord (vs. 16-21)

<sup>16</sup> Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! <sup>17</sup> It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we travelled. <sup>18</sup> And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."

<sup>19</sup> Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. <sup>20</sup> If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you."

<sup>21</sup> But the people said to Joshua, "No! We will serve the LORD."

So that is the question today

- We are on a journey
- We are not just here to experience God
- But to follow him - to seek after Him
- To serve Him, to trust Him, to love Him.

Will we press on despite distractions and challenges?

- Holding to the truth
- And trusting only to Christ to save us
- It is easy to lose our way or focus
- As John Bunyan puts it "Mr. Worldly-Wiseman is not an ancient relic of the past. He is everywhere today, disguising his heresy and error by proclaiming the gospel of contentment and peace achieved by self-satisfaction and works. If he mentions Christ, it is not as the Saviour who took our place, but as a good example of an exemplary life. Do we need a good example to rescue us, or do we need a Saviour?"

In Deuteronomy 2:7 Moses reminds the people

<sup>7</sup> The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything."

Can we testify on our journey that God has blessed us?

- That He has watched over our entire journey through life
- God has been with us and we have not lacked anything.
- Can we respond to Joshua's challenge with the people of Israel
- "We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God." (Jos. 24:18)

I want to finish with the words of the writer to the Hebrews (3:12-14)

"See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.

Amen