

Pentecost 25
23/10/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Joshua 3:7-17

Psalm 107

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

Sermon preached by Rev. Morag Logan

It is always difficult, being the second to achieve some great feat. It is tough being the second child in a family, the second to pass through any number of life's challenges – it is easy to feel that it all has been done before, and that everything is more mundane, less remarkable, less challenging the second time around. This, perhaps, is why I find that there is a mundane aspect to the reading from Joshua that we read today. Even God seems to be emphasizing this secondary nature – saying “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you, a I was with Moses,” You, Joshua, are coming second, and from the start of the passage we are drawn back to that earlier water crossing, and this second seems tamer, lesser in comparison.

Moses was leading the people in dramatic circumstances to cross the Reed sea – Joshua is leading people forward into the land, crossing just a river – and not a very big one, at that!

Moses is leading an escape from pursuit, from a situation of danger and fear – dramatically more exciting. There is high drama, with pillars of fire, and smoke; with the picture of walls of water mounting up on both sides, and pursuing Egyptians in chariots close behind. Here, there is little drama. There is no pursuit, no urgency about the crossing. There is a set of instructions to Joshua and the leaders, the priests walk into the river, the water stops and the people cross. The waters rise up in a heap, but at a far off city. It seems to be a quiet crossing across a dried up river.

Following the Reed sea crossing, the waters returned dramatically, and the fortunes of the Egyptians are reversed – horse and rider thrown into the sea, and with striking descriptions of the dead Egyptians on the shore. Here, there is no focus on the return of the water – it seems to just start flowing again. There is no death explicitly here, no-one is swept away, but there is the uncomfortable aspect of the future. Joshua and his people are portrayed to be setting out to be conquerors here, with God, and the people under Joshua driving out the current residents of the land – which we rightly find an uncomfortable image.

The two crossing stories form “bookends” if you like, to the time in the wilderness. The first crossing, the crossing of the Reed Sea is one of the markers of a crossing from slavery and oppression into freedom. It is the start of a time of marked simplicity – albeit the uncomfortable simplicity brought about by reduced circumstances, of eking out survival in adverse conditions, but it is a time marked by absolute reliance on the provision of God, clarity in the relationship with God. The second crossing brings the wilderness time to an end, and marks the start of a more complex time. This crossing is a movement into a pattern of taking and holding land;

a time with the potential of abundance and flourishing, not just survival; a time of greater (and changed) responsibility. Potentially, at least, it is a step towards being oppressors, conquerors, those who drive out the earlier residents of the land.

Emotionally, ideologically, I think we have a strong preference for staying in the wilderness! Imagery from this time is woven into our identity in the UCA – from the Basis of Union, we think of ourselves as a “pilgrim people” “We are a pilgrim people, always on the way to a promised goal.” The focus remains fixed on the travelling, on being “on the way”

This passage from Joshua encourages thinking about what do we do when we get there. When we reach the “promised goal.” The concept of being a pilgrim people allows the possibility that this arrival simply never happens, allows the possibility that the journey remains the focus, remains more important than the goal, and the concepts of arrival are endlessly deferred – this may be some of the dynamics present in the common folk/hymnody motif where the “crossing of the Jordan” into the “promised land” becomes a motif of death, passing through death to the life beyond – arrival postponed until the final moment of human life.

However, if we want to take seriously the call to the promised land, and not just as an image of our own death - it is worth thinking more about this crossing. However uncomfortable we find it, there are some important aspects of it for us. The people of God were called into the promised land, not into endless journeying, were called to face the challenges of being in the land, of forming a nation.

Now there certainly is much about this narrative we rightly find uncomfortable. Conquest and dispossession are not part of our self-identity that we wish to claim - no matter how fast they are woven into our history. That, however, is too great a topic for this time - a topic for another day.

This is not to set the discomfort aside, and forget about it – we need to keep it in mind in exploring these texts, because no matter what imagery we prefer, we are more a settled people, than a journeying people. There are strong elements of our lives individually, and our worshipping lives that make us more possessors of land, than journeyers through ever changing landscapes, that make us more dispossessors of original owners, than eternal pilgrims. It is important for us to acknowledge this; to keep the discomfort, yes, but, and I acknowledge that this is complex, we also to acknowledge and explore the gifts that God gives us through our being in this position; acknowledge and take into account the responsibilities and work that comes our way because of our “settled” nature, as much as our “journeying” nature.

The gift of the law to the people of Israel is more a gift of settled times than journeying – yes, in the story as we have received it, the law was given on mount Sinai, but reading the law in detail it is a document of a settled people, with land and agriculture, property disputes dominant. The kernel of the idea is placed in the wilderness time, a lot of the concern for justice connects with being a people freed from slavery, but law, legal structures, the ability to think through how to live together is a gift, and a responsibility peculiar to being a settled people, not pilgrims on the way.

Henceforth the prophets would be concerned with the just and faithful government of the nation, not the survival of a wandering band. They might cite the purity of the wilderness experience in chastising the people of their day but we note they never advocated giving up the land to return to the holy purity of the desert.

Instead they had to grapple, as must we, with a finite land and many mouths, with a world where not everyone loved the lord with all their heart and all their soul and their neighbour as themselves where, from time to time, the whole country would seem to desert righteousness.

Even the question of how and where to worship the lord was vexed ... we can only sympathize! The travelling people set up tents for the Ark, a fixed and beautiful space is a gift of settlement.

So are we doomed to forever long for a simpler past - while never truly wishing to go back or must we live our ideas in a fiction of our own wilderness? Not, I think, if we recall why these stories of the wilderness were preserved.

They remind us that the god of the wilderness is also the god of the pasture and the city, spreading his hand over his people now as then. Indeed the god of the wilderness lead the people in to settlement in the land. This god will be with us in our complicated lives, with all their compromises, as he was in the simplicity of the desert. He will continue to lead us, (if we listen) as individuals, as a church and as a nation from the promised land to the kingdom of god.
