

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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## **EXODUS – CHANGE OR DIE**

**10<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

Numbers 13:17-20, 25-33  
Matthew 9:35-38

How long is a long time? When you are a child a day can seem a long time and a year is an infinity. Once when Andrew was small and lamenting how long it was between birthdays, I told him that this was because he was young, but that for older people birthdays seemed to come quite quickly, and the older people are the faster time seems to go. He thought for a minute then said, "So, for Grandma it is just birthday, birthday, birthday!" As indeed it probably was.

How long is a long time for a people who are in transition? A people who have left the past behind but don't know what they are travelling towards? Ask a refugee. They will tell you that time is a strange thing, so that each new stage of life can become "normal" quite quickly, and leaving each new normality behind can become quite hard.

The people of Israel had been travelling for about two years when they came to the outskirts of Canaan, camping in the wilderness of Paran. Two years in which they had left their old homes, crossed the sea of reeds, been fed and watered in the desert, rebelled against God and built a golden calf to worship, been given the ten commandments to live by, and built a tabernacle, a travelling shrine to help them worship God. And, of course, in those two years they had moved on frequently, though not every day. They had learned a lot about practical transient living, and they had learned a lot about the God who had called them out of Egypt and set them of on this path.

When they first set out, God had told Moses not take them by the most direct path, as then they would have to fight their way through intervening nations to reach Canaan, and so they had travelled by the wilderness, the land where it was difficult to live where no one could settle in great numbers. But now they had reached the border of Canaan. Now they could see the fertile land ahead of them, and Moses sends out his spies. Twelve of them for the twelve tribes, so that no one should feel that their part of the nation was unrepresented.

They went, at the beginning of the grape harvest, and they looked and saw and, crucially, they interpreted what they saw.

They saw the grapes, and brought some back, they realised that the land was fertile, a land, as they had been promised, "flowing with milk and honey". But it was not empty, just waiting for them. Maybe they hadn't thought about that in their travels. Maybe they had assumed that there was a land waiting for them just to walk in and cultivate it. Their nation, when it was just a family, Jacob's family, had lived in Canaan before: maybe they had assumed that despite the passage of 400 years, the land would be just as it was when they left it, sparsely populated, there for the taking.

It was not; and most of the spies were frightened by what they saw. They were frightened by the strong, well-fed people, who obviously lived an organised life, not as chaotic nomads. And when they reported back, they did not just tell what they saw, but also how they felt. Caleb and, as we hear later, Joshua, did not react in the same way as the other ten spies. They said, "We should go." Later, beyond what we read, they said "Do not rebel against the Lord, and do not fear the people of the land..." But the people did not listen. They caught the fear from the majority report. The result was that they had to spend a lot longer than they might have living as nomads in the wilderness.

The people had learned a lot since leaving Egypt, but they hadn't learned enough. Their learning hadn't gone deep enough. They had learned survival skills, and some of these skills involved a measure of faith, but in fact they hadn't learned really to trust God. Indeed, at this point they come very close to rejecting Moses from being their leader, to stoning Joshua and Caleb, and to electing someone else to lead them back to Egypt. Fear and lack of faith nearly derailed the whole project.

We shouldn't underestimate the effects of fear, nor the reluctance there is in most people to change things and go off the known paths of life into an unknown future, even if they are promised that that future will be better. We are told that when doctors tell a patient that they need to make radical changes in their lifestyle – lose weight, stop smoking, take more exercise or whatever - or they will die, soon or sooner than otherwise, ninety percent of patients make no changes at all. Ninety percent of people would rather live the life that they know, even when they are told it is killing them, than make changes that could give them more and better quality of life. Ninety percent! That is a lot of reluctance to change.

We see it too in our approach to pollution and waste. We know, we have been told, that our current throw-away culture cannot be sustained, and is harmful for the planet which is our home, the planet on which we all depend for survival, but will we make the changes we both could and should? Some will, and they should be lauded and emulated, but most won't. We don't want to make changes. They are an effort. They take thought, they take effort, they mean that we have to re-train our minds and our habits.

The people of Israel were like that 90 percent. Or perhaps 90% of the people were, which you would expect! They would rather not change their habit of mind: and their habit of mind was that Moses should make things easy for them, because they had done him a favour by coming on this journey. And so, it was back to the wilderness, because they had more to learn. The wilderness is both a place of learning and a place of death. In fact, for the bulk of the generation which refused to trust God and enter Canaan, it became both. That generation, by and large, died out in the wilderness, while the next one, born into transience, grew up learning to trust God and worship God and live by God's laws in a way that their elders found too hard.

The Church in the West is in a time of transition. In some ways that is where we always should be, and one of our mottos spells this out when it says "Semper Reformanda," "Always being reformed." However, the transition we are going through now is as much of an upheaval as when that Latin motto was coined – at the time of the Reformation. The reformation opened up the church to make the gospel more immediate to all people. It took away the expectation that you needed a priest to pray on your behalf, because you could pray to God yourself. The current reforming of the church is taking that a little further. Now we are saying that we need to take seriously what the Bible says about the Priesthood of all Believers.

This does not mean that every Christian is his or her own priest, or that every one of us is capable of fulfilling all that is needed in the church, but it does mean that when all believers work together the function of priesthood is fulfilled. And the function of priesthood is to bring God to the people and the people to God. Bringing God and people closer is not just the job of an elite or of trained professionals, it is a task for all of us to do as we live our lives among our neighbours.

We have a promised land before us – the fields, remember, are white unto harvest, Jesus said – but what we do with it depends on how we interpret the view. The fields are white unto harvest, and do we say “Great, then let’s find ways that we can get this harvest in. Let us shape ourselves into harvest tools, so that we can bring God’s love to lives which are broken and hurting and disconnected and lost and full of longing?” Or do we say “We are too few, the people don’t listen, no one cares and we can’t do it, we want to go back to Egypt?” Do we remember that God is with us and put ourselves into his hands, or do we think only in terms of programmes and projects which we have used before? Can we learn the lessons of the wilderness years through which the church has been passing, or will we continue to do what we know, hoping that for some reason it will produce different results?

If we dare to put ourselves into God’s hands, then we must be ready for him to re-shape us, to make us the harvest tools for here and for now. He may change the priorities in our lives, he may change the people we find ourselves hanging out with, he may change the way that we relate to him. And remember, 90% of people would rather risk death than change. It takes faith and courage to be in the other 10%.

Today we gather around the Lord’s table and take the bread which is Christ’s broken body and the wine which is his blood. These are symbols of Jesus’ dying, and taking them, we are uniting ourselves with him in his death. That death was the ultimate wilderness experience, but through it we are given new life and brought close to God. So, as we take the bread and the wine may we lay down before Christ all our resistance to living his way and being his implements and servants in the gathering of his harvest. Amen.

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