

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

EXODUS SETTING OUT

13th May 2018

Exodus 13:17-22

Matthew 5:1-16

In thinking about the story of the exodus, we are not going to read every word. If you want to, you can do this in the books of Exodus, obviously, Numbers and Deuteronomy (Leviticus is mainly lists and laws). So, what has happened since the beginning of the story that we read last week? Well, crucially, there was the birth of Moses, who was hidden from those who would carry out the Pharaoh's orders and kill baby boys. We need to remember the story that we heard long ago about the baby in the rush basket hidden in the river, watched over by his sister and found by the princess, who took him, hired his own mother to nurse him, and brought him up as her own son. We are to recall that Moses grew up with a desire to help his own people and that he began badly, by killing an Egyptian and becoming an outcast, which led to him going into the wilderness where he met with God, eventually, and was given instruction about how he could bring his people away from their oppressors. That is a very condensed version of what happened!

But finally, the people of Israel left Egypt. After 430 years, after the dramatic days of the plagues and the traumatic night of Passover, they left hurriedly, sent away by the Egyptians who had learned to associate them with things going wrong. It was exciting, but it was a great change. A few weeks ago, at Messy Church we thought about this chapter in the people's history. We built a big doorway out of cardboard boxes which we marked with red paint - not blood, you will be glad to know - and we all went through it. But more tellingly, Morag dressed the children in travelling clothes and gave them bundles to carry, things they would need, things they couldn't bear to leave behind, but then she got them to think about how it would feel, going off on an unknown journey. And she put herself in the place of an old woman and talked about how afraid she would be: what if she couldn't keep up? What if she grew ill? What if her grandchild, who was just a baby, suffered?

You see, knowing the end of the story, which was long years away, we have tended to hear this story of the exodus, the day of leaving Egypt, as one of unmixed joy. Moses had said "Let my people go" and they were finally free! But that is because we are outside the story. The people were inside the story. They did not know where they were going. They might have been told it would be to a "land flowing with milk and honey" but that is a fairly vague address or destination. They had had a hard life in Egypt, but it was all that they knew, and the unknown might be worse. So yes, some would be joyful and excited, perhaps especially the strong and the young, but many would have other feelings as they obediently followed Moses out of the land, a trail of refugees carrying what they could, such as we have so often seen straggling across continents.

And so, although it might not have seemed like it at the time, the writer of Exodus, looking back, pays tribute to God for being with his people, leading them in cloud and fire by day and night, and not taking them the most direct route. They did not go by

the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer, because if they went that way they would almost certainly have to fight, and they weren't ready for that sort of challenge yet.

The people had been 430 years in Egypt. That is a long time. That is long enough to put down very deep roots and feel that you belong. It is very nearly as long as the reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland has been rooted in our land. The Scottish reformation was in 1560, which was 458 years ago. It is a long time to be embedded in a society, to have power and influence, to be respected and deferred to. But those roots are being exposed now. The shifting sands of opinion and culture have dug up the roots and unless they find a new soil they will wither. The General Assembly still meets with great pomp beginning this Saturday, but most of the country will be unaware of this (unless sex comes up on the agenda) and will not care what is said.

Times have always changed, but until now the change has always included the Kirk embedded in them. Not now. Now we are setting out on a journey just as much as the Israelites were when they were put out of Egypt, when they were told that there was not room for them in the land where they had lived for 430 years.

Yes, it was a Good Thing that they should leave, but it wouldn't feel like it to many at the time. And yes, I think it is a Good Thing that the Church can no longer take for granted our place in society. This change of status could lead to us turning in on ourselves and seeking to survive in the old way, but I hope that instead of that, it will lead us – urgently – to rediscover why we are here in the first place; what Jesus called us to do, what it means to be his disciples. On our journey, we need to have more of a goal than just “keeping things going”; we need to catch again the vision which the first disciples had, of telling the world, our local world, of the love of God in Jesus and the difference that it can make to life. I mean, where else are you going to find the love and acceptance that you know here? You may know it in your family – though not all do – but where else outside of family will you find it? We have a great gift to bring to the world, because even our community is full of people who badly need love and acceptance, to know that they are noticed and needed and appreciated and not judged.

If I have a vision and a vague hope of a destination for us, it would be that wherever you Christian people are, little communities of love and acceptance will spring up. We see some already, with Messy Church and rhyme Time and the people that meet to eat together on a Sunday night. We see it in Laggan's helping hand. And I should love to see it more and more, little groups of people accepting and loving and tied to the church because they contain some of you in them – though not exclusively! But these things only happen gradually, as we travel.

So, the people left Egypt, and when they went, they had two reassurances. First of all, they did not leave with absolutely nothing. In the moment of leaving they were encouraged to ask for small valuables, jewellery and so on from their Egyptian neighbours, who were so frantic to be rid of them that they gave freely. That will have felt good. That was one reassurance – none of us like to feel that we travel with nothing. But when our reassurance is found in what we have, it seldom goes well, and in the end that reassurance was to prove a snare to them; it was that treasure which they were later to melt down to form the golden calf which they decided to worship when Moses was too long on the mountain with God.

But the other reassurance was more lasting: God went with them. God went with them, and no one could doubt it because they could see the cloud and the fire, encircling, protecting, guiding. God went with them, and God knew what was best for them. If they were ready to be a fighting force they might have reached the promised land in pretty short order. But God know what they were ready for and it was for neither of these things. They weren't ready to fight, a bunch of people who as slaves only took orders but did not know how to organise themselves. They weren't ready to fight, and they weren't ready to occupy the land and be God's people there. The journey needed to be long to give them time to adapt and learn and become more like the people that would bear God's name. But however long it would be – and they did not know that yet - God would be with them.

And that is our promise and our reassurance as well. When we hold before our eyes the vision and challenge of the beatitudes; the vision of a world where the meek and pure in heart, the merciful and poor in spirit, and the peacemakers are blessed and valued and lifted up; when we hear the challenge of being salt for the earth and light for the world; when we are re-capturing the vision of our faith, re-dreaming the dream, we need to know that we are not alone. When we face new challenges of how we order ourselves as a church, working more closely with Christians in Newtonmore/Laggan and Kingussie and across the presbytery, we need to remember our vision and remember that we are not alone.

Yes, it would be nice to have some definite picture of where we are going. But the Israelites didn't have that; they just knew that it wouldn't be Egypt and so it would be different. For us, as for them, the focus now is not the destination but the journey and what we can learn on the way. What can we learn of being poor in spirit, or yes, of mourning? Some of us will mourn for the past, just as the Israelites did, and that is normal, but we still need to keep moving forwards. What can we learn of being meek and of hungering and thirsting for righteousness – our own or for righteousness to prevail in what is often a wicked world? How can we learn to be merciful and pure in heart and to make peace? And how can we learn to honour those in our community who are also learning these things? Those who are often ignored because they are meek or poor in spirit; those who are seen as soft because they are merciful or seek to make peace?

We are on a journey, led by God and there is much to learn on the way. God grant that we follow his vision, the vision of Jesus, and let nothing of the past be more important than following in the present. Amen.

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