

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## God at Work

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**  
**Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> November 2011**

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Matthew 25:1-12

If you were at the outreach evening last Sunday, you will have heard Paul Jones and Fiona, his wife, remembering, for our benefit, how it was that they come to believe in God and have their lives transformed by him. As theatrical people, it was a tale dramatically told, but the sincerity of the telling shone through. It was obvious that as they looked back and saw how God prepared them to be ready when he called them to become his children and his disciples, the memory of the events still filled them with joy and wonder.

Joshua is doing something similar for the Israelites in today's reading. In fact the verses that we didn't read are a summary of large chunks of the books of Genesis and Exodus. They tell of God giving the land to Abraham and his children. They recall the people going to Egypt and Moses and Aaron coming to lead them out again. The plagues are recalled, and the parting of the Red Sea, with the subsequent destruction of Pharaoh's armies. The time in the desert is remembered, and how God had intervened when they were threatened by King Balak. Joshua reminds them of how they crossed the Jordan and took the land, making the point that it was not given to them by their sword (although swords were used) but by God's provision for them and presence with them. And then, in light of all this he invites them to declare that they will be people who will serve God.

That was their story. What is yours? How have you seen God at work in your life? Maybe, like myself, God gave you believing parents, who gently paved the way for you to hear, to understand and to accept the good news of God's love, forgiveness and salvation.

But maybe that is not your story. If it is not, how is it that you came to be here today?

Maybe you just came for the baptism.

Maybe God gave you believing parents, but somehow you found it hard to believe what they taught you and you turned away from the message of God's love. Maybe it was only after time spent living without God in your life that you realised your need of him and came back.

Maybe your childhood was spent with no meaningful mention of God at all. Perhaps there have been many proddings along the journey of your life, which made you begin to realise that God was reaching out to you.

Think back on the journey of your life. Some, of course have travelled for longer than others. Some have travelled further in terms of the geography of the earth, and some have travelled further in terms of the geography of the spirit. Think back on your journey. Joshua had dramatic events to recall to his people's minds: the Red Sea crossing, the incident when an ass saw an angel and spoke and so averted disaster for God's people, and so on. Have you had red-letter events in your journey with God? One or two maybe? Not daily, of course. Daily life for the wandering Israelites was camping, and dust, and subsistence, and sand. But there were these more memorable days. What are yours? Where have you seen God's hand most clearly?

Whatever your personal story of journeying to and with God, one event stands out for all of us: the

death of Jesus for our sins, and his resurrection to bring us new life. However we come to know and believe in the power of that event, if we are Christian it will fit into our pattern of life somewhere.

Joshua is recalling the red-letter days to the people because he wants to remind them how good God has been to them, because he wants them to respond to God with commitment. They are leaving the travelling and invading life behind and turning to settle in the land, and he wants to be sure that they will continue to follow God and his ways.

God wants all of us to do that as well: to decide to turn away from whatever is not good and true and godly, to decide not to be led by the opinions and practices of our neighbours, however easy that would be, and to allow our lives to be shaped by our allegiance to him. God wants us to follow him and to do so in a committed way, not just when it occurs to us. So what are the ways that he has been, that he is drawing you to himself?

Joshua wants to get the people to agree with him that they will serve God, and he is very successful! The people say "We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." (v:18) This is wonderful! This is surely when Joshua should throw a party. It is when he should get out his sign-up sheets and get them all to sign or make their hieroglyphs on the dotted line. This is when he should pour himself a large drink, sit down, put up his feet and say "My work is done!"

But, of course, he doesn't. Instead, he makes the people think again. He challenges them. He professes to doubt them and says that they cannot really serve God, and that if they set out to do so and then fail it will be the worse for them. Of course, he doesn't really want to stop them following God: his whole life has been spent in listening to and obeying God and in making sure that he leads the people in God's ways. But he does want to be sure that the people are making a commitment that they really mean.

When couples are getting married in a religious ceremony - either in church or elsewhere - the minister meets with them beforehand. Part of the reason for this is to plan the ceremony. But another reason is so that the minister can help the couple be sure that they know the depth of commitment that they are asking of and offering to each other. No one wants to help people make promises that they have no intention of keeping. (Of course, with the best will in the world, there are times when these vows do get broken, but before the wedding at least the intention to keep them must be real.)

In the same way when parents bring a child for baptism, no one wants them standing up in church and promising before God and others to believe and do things that really mean nothing to them. There are churches which have almost a three line whip on this. In this church we take the parent's intentions on trust: only they and God know if their promises are really more than words. But no one wants people to make vows which they have no intention of fulfilling, which they are only planning to keep when it is not inconvenient to them.

In the story Jesus told about the bridesmaids, the five foolish girls are like those who say that they will follow Jesus, that they will live God's way, but they haven't counted the cost to themselves: they haven't really thought through what that may mean. They only have enough oil - enough commitment - for a short time. They haven't considered the down-side - what if the bridegroom is late and doesn't work to our expectations? - and they haven't worked at keeping fresh and prepared. Not enough oil is a symbol of having no staying power.

The five girls who do have the spare oil are people who have done all that: thought it through, got themselves ready and realised that they will not be in control - the bridegroom has his own timetable, and God moves in our lives in unexpected ways. These wise girls are those who, like

Joshua, really know what they are saying and mean it with all their hearts.

In our services of late we have talked a lot about following and being a disciple. Some people, like the people to whom Joshua spoke, can say exactly when they decide to start following in God's way, trusting Jesus, accepting the gift of the Holy Spirit. For others it is a more gradual process, until one day they realise that yes, Jesus is their Lord and God is their God and they could not imagine living without God's help by his Spirit within them. The decisive moment or the gradual realisation are of equal value. What matters is how we go on, once we have realised that we do believe and do want to follow. What matters is that we have counted the cost and bought the extra oil, as it were, and have decided to follow with real staying power.

God moves in our lives in ordinary days and in extraordinary, inexplicable ways, because he wants to call us to himself, and when we are already following him, he knows that we need his encouragement to keep on following. He calls us, and he wants us to know to whom we are responding. He loves us, and because of that he is jealous of our love, watching over it carefully, not wanting to see it squandered on less than the best, which is him. When we say that we follow him, he does not regard it as a light matter if we turn away and go off on our own way. He will forgive us - seventy times seven, as Jesus told us we too should forgive - but it is still no light matter.

So, today, the words of Joshua still come down the centuries: "Choose this day who you will serve." It is a daily choice. And the response is a daily answer "We will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

Amen