

Sermon

Sunday 5 July 2020

Exodus 13: 17 to 22

Cloudy Pillar

There is an image in our reading from Exodus today which you just cannot get out of your head. The pillar of cloud with a fire which burned within. A practical guide.

A fire too bright to look conveniently masked by cloud during the day, but clearly visible by night. A navigator's dream.

I have the picture by a very talented artist called Jack Hayes in the Bible I was given as a child.

The fire and cloudy pillar of the great hymn.

Bones

But go back to the beginning of our passage and you have another symbol. The bones of Joseph.

Gareth Lloyd Jones

None of my cohort of LLMs will forget Gareth Lloyd Jones, the charismatic Welsh lecturer on the OT.

We started on a Friday evening.

We have got a lot to get through between now and lunchtime on Sunday he said. I suggest you do not waste asking questions unless you know more about this than I do and you do not.

And we was right.

Gareth's book on the OT is named after this passage: The Bones of Joseph.

Were Joseph's bones hurriedly disinterred by fleeing slaves and then carried through the desert for 40 years?

It is bad enough losing your car keys. "Anyone remember where we buried Joseph?"

Gareth asks – 2 million people fled Egypt that night. Did they really have time to break into a pyramid and steal Joseph's bones?

The bones of Joseph were a link to the past. Whether metaphorical or not, the soon-to-be pilgrim people were told to never forget where they had come from.

Pillars

But once the fire and cloudy pillar appear, it is easy to forget the bones.

And the cloudy pillar says it all:

- God not only rescued his people he stayed with them as a guide. A saving God becomes a companion God.

- His goal is not to fix the current crisis but bring about salvation. Keep moving onwards.
- God does not just lend a helping hand or appoint good leaders. God acted directly.
- Moses did drive the cloud – wheeling a portable barbeque so the people what follow. God really did the leading. God leads for us. God fights spiritual battles for us.
- More than that. God meets our every need. If getting lost is the danger, finding your way is the need. The cloudy pillar does the job.
- As the Exodus story unfolds the needs change. There are enemies to be protected from. God dispatches them.
- There is the need for food and drink. Manna. Bread of heaven. You will have to read further into Exodus. God looks after his people.

Current Crisis

Even in the midst of a crisis we are under the supervision of a persistent God. A God who not only plucks us from danger but stays with us. A saviour who becomes a companion.

Children' Bible

But it is just a cloud.

My children's Bible showed the great flat expanse of the desert with a great cloud on the horizon.

Crossing a great flat desert does not require a fire or cloudy pillar. It requires walking in a straight line.

The pilgrims did not need guiding. They needed encouragement. They needed to know God was with them.

Verse 17

But that was not true at the start of the journey.

Back in verse 17 God guided the escapees. He did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, which was shorter. God led the people around by the desert road towards the Red Sea,

How did he do that? No fire and cloudy pillar. Not even a mini tornado or dust devil conveniently hovering over the right path at the fork in the road.

Bones

My guess is that this was a real test of Moses' leadership. Flee Egypt! Run for your life! But do not take the shortest route. God wants to take us through the desert instead. A hard sell.

And perhaps this is where a reminder was needed of all that God has done in the past.

And where the bones of Joseph played a part. Tradition. Community. Fellowship. And a reminder that God has never let his people down.

For the big picture there is the cloudy pillar. For the close up – decisions, leadership, and debate – there are the bones of Joseph. Being in tune to God today and having a sense of tradition and a reminder of all that God has done in the past.

Lock Down

So here we are with another lock-down service feeling like a pilgrim people. We are not quite sure what the future holds. And yet the memories of our church building and normal Sunday worship is an image which keeps us going.

I like the picture we have on the screen before our service starts. This is my Bones of Joseph.

The church has for many decades found tradition a rather unhelpful thing. We have been re-inventing worship for no other reason that we want to keep it feeling fresh and modern. Maybe we will look differently on tradition now.

St Marys

And for us at St Mary's we are on another journey – or about to be on one – with Andrew and Jenny's departure.

Caught between past and future.

External issues – the reopening of public places of worship

Internal issues. An interregnum. Matters of leadership.

We have much in common with the Exodus pilgrims.

Bones Of Joseph

In the preface to his book, Gareth Lloyd Jones mulls over this question: what is the place of tradition?

He quotes the theologian Alister McGrath:

Tradition is a willingness to read scripture, taking in to account the ways it has been read in the past. It is an awareness of communal dimension of Christian faith, which call shallow individualism into question. There is more to the interpretation of scripture than any one individual can discern. It is a willingness to give full weight to the views of those who have gone before us in faith.

Over the coming months I am sure God will lead us. A fire and cloudy pillar.

But we will also have to lead ourselves. Remind ourselves of our own identity and what God has done for us.

Look at what we have done in the past not as the baggage of tradition but the awareness of the communal dimension of our faith.

A cloudy pillar for the pulpit; bones of Joseph for the PCC.

Amen