

Sermon: The Challenge of a New Beginning

The Rev'd Dr Donald Stewart A.M.

26th October 2014

20th Sunday after Pentecost

Moses is an old man. Taken as a baby from a little boat in the bulrushes of the Nile by an Egyptian princess. She named him with a name which was common among the Pharaohs of Egypt. Our name Moses is a translation of the Egyptian into Hebrew then translated from the Hebrew into English. It is the same name which you encounter in Pharaohs such as Ramses and Tutmoses. Ramses - where the "Ra" is the name of his principal Egyptian God – the God of the Sun and Tut is another Egyptian God. The latter part of the name is the same Moses which means "out of the River". We need to remember the Egyptians treated the Nile like a God for on it the Egyptian economy was almost totally dependent.

Moses as a prince had to flee from Egypt because it became known that he had killed an Egyptian Taskmaster who Moses encountered mistreating a Hebrew slave. He fled into the Sinai wilderness. There he met a group of girls seeking to water their herd at a spring. Some men came and sought to drive the girls and their herd away so they could water their herd but Moses in turn as a trained soldier soon drove the men away and allowed the girls to water their herd. Moses was invited to stay with their father who we would call a sheik with his retinue. Moses married one of the girls.

One day as he took his herd of sheep and goats into the wilderness seeking pasture. He saw something that was unusual, a burning bush. A burning bush required attention, a fire could be dangerous – as we all know. So on investigating he found a bush that burned but was not consumed. As he looked in amazement the Lord spoke to him out of the burning bush. God was telling Moses to go back into Egypt and to rescue the Hebrews and take them to the land of Canaan.

Moses wasn't easily persuaded to do what God wanted. He put up his arguments as to why he should not go. Eventually though he was persuaded. He went back into Egypt and confronted Pharaoh with his demand. It was a long drawn out tussle but eventually Pharaoh reluctantly decided to let them

go, but then changed his mind and pursued them with his army. His army encountered them as they were facing the “Yam suf” – the sea of reeds which we have interpreted as the Red Sea. Moses successfully, with God’s intervention, led them across while Pharaoh’s army was drowned in the sea.

Moses then led the people arguing, complaining and revolting against Moses and God for some 40 years as they made their way through the wilderness toward Canaan, their promised land. That was probably a good thing for it gave them time and experience to become a nation in place of a bunch of slaves.

Moses has been training his successor, Joshua, who is to take over the leadership. They are facing the Jordan River which they must cross to enter into the land they have been promised.

Moses is old and tired. Traditionally the book Deuteronomy is Moses message to the people as they enter a new phase in the conquest, occupation and governance of their new land. Moses with his passion for his God has done all he could to bring them to a faithful trust in God.

Here God speaks again to Moses, reminding him of some of his failures in the long journey to this point of time. He is not to enter the land with his Hebrew people, instead, God allows Moses to see the land. It was a view that was much more extensive than Moses could have seen from his position on top of the mountain.

Moses, the old man, goes to be with God and his body is buried where no one knows. No one is then to make a memorial to Moses and worship him there.

We stand now with the Children of Israel at the crossing of the Jordan, the conquest of their Promised Land, their future occupation and the task of governing this land. They may not realise the size of the task, but there is a belief, certainly in Joshua, that this is possible. For them all it is a new beginning. Moses has given them all he can, but now they are on their own.

Our Epistle takes us to another new beginning.

In the New Testament reading from the Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians the Apostle reminds them of how the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ –

came among them. Paul had made his way from Troy across the Aegean Sea to Philippi, a Roman city, where he and Silas were thrown into prison for telling the people about the Saviour. An earthquake in the night while Paul and Silas are singing hymns results in the Roman Jailer becoming a Christian and learning that his prisoners are Roman citizens. The authorities had put them in prison not knowing that Paul and Silas were Roman citizen, so the next morning on learning this they immediately go to the prison to release them and to apologise for what had been done to them. But they urge them not to stay in Philippi. So they made their way to Thessalonica then on to Beroea, to Athens and then on to Corinth. At each place they had visited the town synagogue where the local Jews worshiped along with people who appreciated the right living of the Jews as they worshiped the God who was not named but was referred to as “ha shem”, Hebrew for “the Name”. They spent time telling them the good news of Jesus Christ. There had been opposition, not always from the local people but sometimes from places they had visited earlier.

For Paul Corinth was an important place in his strategy of spreading the Gospel. It lay on the main route from Rome to the empire in the east. People going both ways, to and from Rome by ship, had to spend time in Corinth while their ship was moved on rails across the land of the Corinthian Peninsula between the Gulf of Corinth and the Aegean Sea. What an opportunity to spread the gospel to people both coming and going towards Italy and Rome and to the people of the eastern Empire.

But now he is writing to the Christians of the City of Thessalonica and reminding them of how the good news of the Gospel had been delivered to them. For them it was a new beginning. They had been worshiping Idols in the temples around the city but now they were seeking to worship God through Jesus Christ. The new beginning wasn't easy. What was the name of this new God? It was the God the Jews worshiped, but it was the Son of God that was their Saviour, Jesus Christ who had lived in Palestine among the Jews, who had been crucified under Roman Law, but he had not stayed buried but had risen again and had ascended into Heaven. That was quite a story to believe.

Not only that, but their way of living had been turned upside down. This was a God who wanted righteous living. Stealing, abuse and corruption were not on. Marriage was a sacred bond and behaviour outside of marriage was a sin.

Worship of other gods was out, this was the only true God of all the earth and they were his ambassadors. Kindness and love with seeking the welfare of all people was the order of the day. Even the buying of meat was a problem, for in most towns it was the pagan temple that acted as the butcher shop.

Their scriptures were the books of the Old Testament. As the Apostles wrote letters setting out the way for Christians to live and worship and the stories of Jesus' life on earth. These documents were slowly gathered together and were later recognised, after some study and controversy, as God's word and became what we call the New Testament.

I tell you, as Paul reminds us, that in that kind of world it was not easy to proclaim the Gospel. He reminds us that it was through gentleness, through a love for the Thessalonian people that they were able to tell them of the love of God in Jesus Christ. We do well to listen carefully to the way that Paul describes sharing the Gospel with these people. After their experience in Philippi they needed courage to speak of Jesus Christ to the Thessalonians. There was opposition but they tackled the task honestly, no trickery or deceit, they weren't trying to simply get on with the people so that they felt good, no flattery. I understand that they were being human beings telling the people honestly what they believed and why, and with it there would have been a passion in telling the Gospel.

And it worked. As Paul knew it would. To live the Gospel day by day. "You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright and blameless our conduct was toward you believers" says Paul in his letter to them "As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God"

When we understand how in that world, Paul worked at the spreading the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and which led to the success of establishing a Church in that world, we know we have much to learn from him. We all stand at a point where we are faced with the need for a new beginning here and now to spread the Gospel in our increasingly violent world.

It is not about dollars or brashness or political correctness by which we will spread the Gospel in our increasingly violent world; but by the gentleness, love and passion demonstrated by the Apostle Paul so long ago. Yes we need his

strategic thinking. But it is his courage, his honesty and his faith in God through Jesus Christ his Lord that enabled him to so spread the Gospel through his World.

We must realise that we, like the Children of Israel and the Apostle Paul in Thessalonica and in his world, stand at a beginning of the great task of spreading the Gospel among the people of our world.

It is a great and important challenge.