



End of Year Service 2016

The call of the promise

Joshua 1:1-9

As we come to the closing weeks of this calendar year and this special occasion when we acknowledge the long service achievements of colleagues, and affirm one another in the presence of God, we turn our minds to the challenge of the future.

A service of this kind has many markers of past achievements and the events that have characterised our recent days. But I believe it is helpful to cast our vision into the future.

Joshua is one of the great characters of the Old Testament and certainly is helpful when considering a journey and asking that all important question, 'Where to from here?' The Book of Joshua describes how the tribes of Israel, under the leadership of Joshua, entered the Promised Land. This carefully organised book begins with the announcement of the death of Moses and the new responsibility that falls upon Joshua's shoulders.

Joshua was one of twelve spies sent ahead to scope out the new land and he was involved in bringing the building aspirations of Jericho to a swift end.

Joshua has a good deal to say to communities on the move, especially at significant times in their history. He is given a clear instruction by God to prepare the people to cross the Jordan River to inhabit a place of promise.

Joshua 1:9 –

'Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid: do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

People who are shaped by the kind of leadership experience that Joshua had are always people looking forward with hope. If I am asked to define something of the distinguishing marks of Wesley Mission, I invariably consider the ability to move forward with confidence, sometimes against all the odds, in each succeeding generation.

We remind ourselves that Joshua and the Children of Israel have just survived the experience of forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Human communities, and more especially communities of faith, live best as a people of promise. Studies in this area have referred to our deep human hunger for security, the aspirations of peace, justice and love, as well as the promise of hope for a people.

A sense of hope serves to give us a compass point on our journey. Our promise can be blurred, but is the greatest gift that God gives to us and, as one writer put it, 'This promise, elusive yet alluring, can and must be our future.'

As we cast our vision into the future, we know that we build upon firm foundations that enable us to face whatever the threats to our promise might be.



Looking across the frontiers, well into the twenty-first century, we must be certain of three truths that will confront us time and time again.

These three self-evident factors will present themselves in one form or another as we move forward:

We can't go back

Even the most pleasant nostalgic memories of better times must not draw us into believing their false attraction. As one cynic put it, 'Nostalgia isn't what it used to be!'

I have no difficulty in empathising with those who want to live in the security of the past. But we can't go back. Even if the thoughts of the past were accurate, the gates to the past are slammed shut for ever.

Retro is very fashionable today and there is no doubt that it holds an attraction for many. We can probably recall the clothes we wore just a couple of decades ago and realise if we had held onto them, we would be well and truly in fashion today.

The first chapter of Joshua quite deliberately links the eras of Moses and Joshua. In fact, closer study reveals the literary echoes of the earlier in the latter. Joshua's leadership is modelled upon Moses and he carries on the work, albeit in a different way. But it is certain that he cannot go back.

These strong religious truths that have helped to establish a whole religious tradition have clear and penetrating social implications. We cannot wish the past on the present.

- In Christian mission, we are facing huge seismic shifts in the landscape where we must articulate our message
- In our welfare and community work, we are moving from a philanthropic model with people being recipients of kindness – to a place where clients are at the centre of every pattern of our work moving forward.

In such a social context, the past feels very enticing! But we cannot go back. However, it is important to say that this does not mean we have to jettison everything that represents the past. Holding together these truths often has to be done in a creative tension.

Joshua's story marks a great turning point in history (1:2). The old era has passed with the death of Moses. Joshua's life's work was commissioned by Moses (Deut.31:23) and he was called to make something happen.

In verses 7 to 8, it becomes very clear that whatever this risky enterprise was to amount to, it was going to need to be faithful to God.

There is a real 'Word and deed' application of Joshua's mission:

- It has to be performed and put into action (v.7)
- It has to be taken into heart and mind (v.8).

These are the things that enable us to let go of the past and move into the future.



If Josephus, the Jewish historian, is accurate, Joshua had certainly experienced the bondage of Egypt. He had experienced the frustration, cruelty and intolerance of the taskmasters. He had patiently endured the wanderings of the wilderness. Why would he and others want to go back? But some certainly did.

Escapees into the past do not have good memories, but poor ones.

We can't stand still

We can't stay here because time cannot be stopped, however much we'd like it to be possible. The status quo cannot be stabilised for long without its inherent evils destroying us. The future is streaming into the present and, using the illustration of Jesus, there is no way to contain the sparkling new wine of the future in the brittle wine skins of either the past or the present.

Of course, we must celebrate boldly present achievements, but we have to be a community anticipating the future. We may not always get it right, but it is a far more dangerous exercise to want to keep our ship firmly anchored in the present.

I have just completed a series of four addresses where I have been asking the question, 'Is there more to life than this?' In one of those addresses I described the situation in Britain after the Second World War, as people were seeking to return to normality. They had been living under the pressure of rationing and, as the hope of a better future arose; many ordinary people began to hope for better things in an annual holiday.

In this context, the great holiday camps developed at major seaside resorts. Billy Butlin became an entrepreneurial giant in this realm and Fred Pontin, likewise, developed his own camps. They had their Red Coats and Blue Coats. Everything was well organised and the trick of the business was to keep everyone occupied, every hour of the day and in doing so people would be very happy and return again the following year. The truth was that life had to change, even in the holiday camps.

We cannot take anything for granted. I recall watching the West Indies play cricket. Bowlers like Charlie Griffiths and Wesley Hall were fearsome. Gary Sobers was unmatchable. Clive Lloyd and later Viv Richards were brilliant. But it did not last.

I could have used a similar illustration to talk about Manchester United who, along with Liverpool, was winning everything. Situations like this do not last.

In every case, there can be considered explanations as to why these things occur. People in Britain started to travel to Europe. Cricketers left Trinidad and Guyana to live and play in other countries. I will make no further comment about Manchester United.

You can never change the past. You cannot be locked in the present. The present holds its own dangers. We must free ourselves to be willing to move into the future.

We can find ourselves standing still, because we know perfectly well that the future involves an endless number of challenges. Alan Redpath, in his book on Joshua, concluded, 'He knew that every inch of advance would be contested by the enemy but a man assured of the call of God is invincible. Certainly he is very conscious of his deficiencies; he is aware of all the walled cities in the land, and of the river that he has to



cross before he gets there. He knows something of the ridicule and the criticism which are forever the portion of those who would dare to stand for God.'

Joshua was facing a crisis. He had been the Number 2 to Moses and he could have chosen to live with a second-lieutenant mentality. This would result in him forever living in the past and, as John Huffman put it, '... lingering in his grief, and musing on what could have been if Moses was there.'

God abruptly disturbed both his backward focus and the comfort of the present so he could be ready to move forward. Those of us who know something of what it means to work with people who carry their childhood insecurities into adult life are aware of how dangerous it can be. There are times when we have to confront the past in the present if we are to grasp the opportunity of the future.

We must move forward

As we cross into tomorrow, we will journey with some, we will meet others who are already there and yet the challenge to move forward lies before us all.

We remind ourselves that the great promise is that God will be with us on our quest to follow his call into the future.

The need of the future is not going to disappear, but new aspects will emerge to which we must be ready to respond.

Joshua 1 is a tightly structured chapter which brings together ideas that will be central throughout the book. Under the leadership of Joshua, the people will display strength, courage and obedience.

The crossing of the Jordan, described in Chapters 3 to 4, is a key moment in the story of Israel. It is presented in an elaborate, multi-strand narrative, describing several events going on simultaneously, but none of it could have happened without a willingness to move forward.

The future is not only a land that we enter, but a place, a vision and a work that we help to create. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his Letters and Papers from Prison, considered a new year that was for him and so many around him so negative. Yet he wrote,

With every power for good to stay and guide me,
Comforted and inspired beyond all fear,
I'll live these days with you God in thought beside me,
And pass with you into the coming year.

Our promise is that we do not move into the unknown and the untrusted without the presence of God who is both known and trustworthy.

The crossing of the Jordan parallels the crossing of the Red Sea, which began the journey out of Egypt. We remind ourselves that they left the captivity of Egypt little more than a rabble and entered the Promised Land as a People.

As we come to terms with and reach out for the promise of God, we are certainly aware of the greater journey of the future. In a compliance-dominated culture, where risk needs to



be more carefully managed than ever, and where funding is not handed down as a block but in a competitive environment, we need to have in mind:

- The Christian vision that brought us to life is ever before us
- Our conviction that all people matter, especially those most in need, will be a constant reminder of where we have come from, as well as where we are going
- The God who was with us, who is with us and who will always be with us.

A well-known sports team met for their training after a very successful season. Their coach said he was going to hand out awards for all that was achieved in 1995. He called the players forward one by one and they were cheered by their team mates. He then pulled out a waste bin marked 1995 and in silence the players wondered what he was going to say next. He said, 'What you did in 1995 was terrific, but look at the calendar – it's 1996.'

It's great to celebrate the accomplishments of the past. But with God, our best days are always ahead.