

Reflections from 10:30 am Service 23 April 2017

Reflection 1 (David)

It's become a bit of a cliché these days to describe something, some experience, as a "journey". But the Israelites and their relationship with God - a relationship that leads down the years to us today - truly represents a "journey" – of epic proportions.

The "journey" of the Israelites is set out in the earlier chapters of the Bible.

The Bible is not, of course, a book, but a collection of books – and that's a description that has almost become a cliché too!

In the context, friends, of today's service, today's worship, it's worth recognising at the very start of this reflection, that the Bible is indeed a collection of books.

This week, we begin our celebration of 30 years in this building. What is the faith tradition – the historical background of faith – and the movement of the Spirit of God that has brought us to this point?

In the early books of the Bible – in the Old Testament – we can find, if we look for it, the very basis of the reason why we now worship in this building, and why Methodists and other Christian denominations have come together as worshipping communities.

The sequence of events, as we read accounts in those early books of the Old Testament scriptures, can sometimes be hard to work out – particularly when several books within the timeline cover the same period.

We sang earlier about being a "travelling wandering race" – "we're the people of God" – and this is exactly what the Israelites were in those earliest books.

Those books speak to us about the influence God had in their lives, and about how God was revealing himself – and in Genesis ch.28 we can read these verses about Jacob and his encounter with God:

(Genesis 28: 10-13 and 16-19)

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying...

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' He was afraid and said, 'how awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven'. Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

This is the first reference we find to a "House of God" – as the footnote in our Church Bible says "Bethel" means "House of God". Jacob, though, continues to be a wandering tribesman, with his

family, and as Genesis moves on we can read the accounts of this movement, and of God's continuing revelation – including Jacob's change of name of Israel. He returned to Bethel – "House of God" – as we hear in these verses ...

(Genesis 35: 11-15)

And God said to him, 'I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you.' Then God went up from him at the place where he had talked with him. Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel.

After we've heard about the 12 sons of Jacob, the influence of Joseph, the exile to Egypt, and the rise of Moses as leader, the return of the Israelites to the land God had promised them points us once again towards a "House of God", as a place of worship.

As the people, under Moses' leadership, and by God's direction, continue to wander through the wilderness, Moses receives the law from God on Mount Sinai, confirming the covenant between God and his people. The book of Exodus, from ch.24, gives us the account, and then over the next few chapters – up to Exodus 39 - we hear tell of the requirements God gave for the Ark of the Covenant, and the Tabernacle, to be constructed, to house the tablets of the Law.

(Exodus 39: 32 and 43, and ch.40: 17-21 and 33-38)

So all the work on the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, was completed. The Israelites did everything just as the Lord commanded Moses

Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses blessed them ... So the tabernacle was set up on the first day of the first month in the second year. When Moses set up the tabernacle, he put the bases in place, erected the frames, inserted the crossbars and set up the posts. Then he spread the tent over the tabernacle and put the covering over the tent, as the Lord commanded him. He took the tablets of the covenant law and placed them in the ark, attached the poles to the ark and put the atonement cover over it. Then he brought the ark into the tabernacle and hung the shielding curtain and shielded the ark of the covenant law, as the Lord commanded him...

Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and altar and put up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And so Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

Still, then, we do not read of a permanent building as a "House of God". The Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant were moveable, and were carried with the people wherever they went – God's people saw this as "God being with them", and this continued to be the practice as the people continued to move from place to place. The history of the Ark is set out in the first book of Samuel, chapters 4-7 – and horror of horrors!! – the Ark is captured by the Philistines...

(1 Samuel 4: 5-11)

When the ark of the Lord's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, 'What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?'

When they learned that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp, the Philistines were afraid. 'A god has come into the camp', they said, 'Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before. We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!'

So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons Hophni and Phinehas, died.

When the Ark is recovered, it is hidden away to keep it safe...

(1 Samuel 7: 1 & 2)

So the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord. They brought it to Abinadab's house on the hill and consecrated Eleazar his son to guard the ark of the Lord. The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim a long time – twenty years in all.

It was King David, when he transferred his capital city from Hebron to Jerusalem, who brought the Ark of the Covenant back to the centre of the Israelite identity ...

(2 Samuel 6: 1, 3-5, 12 & 17)

David again brought together all the able young men of Israel – thirty thousand...

They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. David all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with castanets, harps, lyres, tambourines, rattles and cymbals...

Now King David was told, 'The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God.' So David went to bring up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing.... They brought the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offering and fellowship offerings before the Lord.

As we've heard, then, the Ark was still within a tent - and David wanted to create a building – a "house" for the Ark - a "house" of God and for God – But Nathan, the prophet, received God's word for David – and God made it clear that it was not his plan for David to build a house or temple...

(2 Samuel 7: 11b-13)

The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: when your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood – and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever.

So – it was Solomon who constructed the Temple, and the first book of Kings tells us all about it...

(1 Kings 6: 37 & 38 and 1 Kings 8: 6)

The foundation of the temple of the Lord was laid in the fourth year, in the month of Ziv. In the eleventh year in the month of Bul, the eighth month, the temple was finished in all its details according to its specifications. He had spent seven years building it...the priests then brought the ark of the Lord's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim.

It was the first building intended to remain in one place, for worship, with the Ark inside it – they thought it was permanent, but Christine will tell us what happened, in a moment. First, though, we sing hymn no. 415

Reflection 2 (Chris)

They say travel broadens the mind and I think it has broadened mine – but I'm thankful that I've not been **forced** to travel, as the Syrian people have had to in our time. The Jewish people had been familiar with breaking camp and moving on, but by the time of the reigns of King David and his son Solomon, settlement was permanent; the promised land was theirs and, with the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, there was now a magnificent focus for their worship. God was in his Temple. All seemed well.

Seemed is the operative word because, over several hundred years, there was regular harassment from one surrounding tribe or another that had to be dealt with, and bigger powers such as Assyria and Babylon sought to increase their borders. Successive kings and leaders, good and bad, tried to appease enemies, and make treaties with other powers to achieve stability and safety.

Throughout all these turbulent centuries, the lonely voices of the prophets had been heard, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea & Micah to name a few - voices that proclaimed that appeasement and treaties were not the way to go.

The prophet Isaiah said these words –

(Isaiah 30: 15)

"this is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it."

He also had much to say about their sacrifices in the Temple, their praises and fasting. They were all just useless rituals unless their faith was worked out in social equality and justice, which was blatantly absent.

So Isaiah proclaimed these words on behalf of God:

(Isaiah 58: 6-7a)

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter..."

Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, also stressed what God required, in those now famous words:

(Micah 6: 8)

*"He has showed you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."*

But people didn't listen and the worst happened – they were forced, by superpowers, to leave all they knew and journey to a strange land, with no Temple – so where was God now? One of their psalms has the plaintive cry:

"How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?"

It took time for them to realise that God could not be confined in just one place, be it Tabernacle or Temple.

In spite of their predicament, they did have a message of hope to hold on to – a message given years before through the visionary Isaiah that "a servant", on whom the Spirit of God would rest, would be a light to the nations, strong but not aggressive, gentle and just; a person of the highest integrity and wisdom to bring about peace and righteousness. This message was the soil from which their hope for salvation came, their hope for a righteous King, a Messiah.

Years later, many returned to their homeland, but found Jerusalem and the temple in a sorry state; for they had been plundered and desecrated by the invading foreign powers. And it's believed that about that time synagogues then became very important in the maintenance of prayer and teaching after their experience of exile.

It was of course those early followers of Jesus who discerned that the "servant" that Isaiah had prophesied was Jesus himself – he was the embodiment of that longed for Messiah. And Jesus himself quoted from another of Isaiah's writings:-

(Luke 4: 17-21)

"The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'" Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

However, it seemed that the Jewish nation's journeying had not broadened their minds sufficiently to take on board Jesus' teaching, for before he came along, the Temple and life as it was in the past had more or less been restored, and anything and anyone who rocked the boat was suspect.

Consequently, what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well was regarded as revolutionary. Just listen to this!

(John 4: 19-24)

"Sir," the woman said. "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this

mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth”.

Christine’s reflections have brought us through the link from the Old Testament scriptures to the New, as the prophets wrote about the Messiah who would come. The new journey of the people of God had begun.

Jesus, as a Jew, worshipped in the synagogue and, at Festival time, in the Temple at Jerusalem.

Reflection 3 (David)

In the aftermath of the crucifixion, orchestrated as it was by the hierarchy of the Jewish authorities, the disciples could hardly have gone back into the Temple.

If we were to read the gospel passage set for today in the Lectionary, we would hear about the disciples meeting behind locked doors, for fear of the Jewish leaders.

And Jesus came to them – meeting them, as the risen Lord, where they were.

This, friends, became the inspiration for worship and for mission right through the accounts in the New Testament

of the spread of the early church.

The disciples took the gospel to people where they were.

They met people in their houses.

They met people in the market place.

They met people in rooms hired for the purpose of meeting.

They met people in the Temples they were using for worship of whatever god they had revered in their society, up until then.

The opening of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, tells us, in chapter 2, about the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples at Pentecost.

This, my friends, is the same Holy Spirit that has continued to move through the church, to empower the church,

to inspire and to uplift the church, in the centuries since that time.

Sometimes, in retrospect, it’s possible to see special moments in church history when that has happened.

I would suggest that the conversion of Charles and John Wesley was just such a moment.

It was the moment that inspired John Wesley to embark upon his itinerant ministry – taking the gospel to people

where they were.

The moment when Edward Pope arrived from Hackney to live in Loughton in around 1872, was another of those moments when the power of the Holy Spirit can be seen.

As a Methodist Local Preacher, he soon wanted to hire rooms so that he could invite those who wished to do so

to gather for worship. And so, in 1873, Loughton Methodist church came into being.

Our church has had three locations in Loughton and four buildings, one of which moved from site to site – although not quite like the Ark of the Covenant! Friends, I don’t think it’s pushing this connection too far to suggest that this “New Journey of the people of God” has inspired LMC, through the power of the Holy Spirit, throughout its existence.

It was in evidence again 30-odd years ago as the church -

all the members and friends at LMC – once again moved to meet people where they were – opening our doors day by day, taking up the whole of our frontage, improving and increasing outreach.

But we need to remember this – a building is no more than a tool. Loughton Methodist Church may be a building, but it is not the building.

The church is the people.

The church is us – you and me.

The new journey of the people of God begins every day.

It looks forward.

It looks forward with hope and with confidence.

We don't know what the next 30 years may bring – but whenever the next special anniversary celebration takes place here at LMC, let us pray that there will be more blessings – unknown to us at present – but more blessings

for those following us – as the church here at LMC – to look back on then.

Listen to these words from the letter to the Hebrews.

(Hebrews 9: 1-5 & 11-15, and 10: 19-25)

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now...

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant...

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.