

Exodus 13:17-22 & Mark 6:7-11

Sermon

One of the most memorable journeys I ever had was in a 1930s Tiger Moth Biplane, flying from Dundee to Blair Atholl.

It's not a long journey, should only take about 20 minutes by Tiger Moth, crossing the hills to Dunkeld and then following the A9 north.

Ten minutes after we'd taken off, as a passenger, I was sure the engine noise had changed. There was a vibration that wasn't there before. One of the magnetos – the thing that gives ignition – had packed up, and the second magneto wasn't in great shape. 1500 feet above hills and forestry, that old Tiger Moth coughed and spluttered, lost height, gained height, at one point cut out and then restarted. We reached Dunkeld and dropped to 500 feet and followed the main road north. I had visions of us landing on the A9, or even worse, Pitlochry High Street. But we made it back to the landing strip in Blair Atholl, my friend and pilot Andrew Gordon not even slightly shaken by the experience. I on the other hand felt nearer to God than I'd felt in a long time!

That was a journey which was memorable for all the wrong reasons, and I'm hoping and praying that the journey that we – you and me, are about to embark on will be memorable for all the right reasons.

Interim Ministry is very different from Parish Ministry.

The obvious differences are that there's no sense of call – we've been brought together not by a process of interviews, or because we're theologically similar, or we agree on ideas about mission and pastoral care and so on... We know very little about each other's experiences, where we've come from, our hopes and expectations. So we're setting off on this journey together as relative strangers.

It's different from what I'm used to because no longer am I the holder of an office or recipient of a stipend. I'm an employee of 121 George Street and receive a salary. No longer am I under the jurisdiction of a Presbytery – I have a line manager in the Ministries Council. And no longer do I have any say in where I minister – I go where I'm sent!

It's also different from Parish Ministry so far as it is very specific and focused. I'm here for a reason and quite soon I'll be asking the Kirk Sessions the questions,

“What do you hope to achieve and accomplish during this time?”

“Where do you want to be in 18 months?”

And possibly the most difficult question,

“How do you see us achieving those goals – how are we going to reach that destination and point where you are free to call a minister?”

What do we need to do - what do we need to change, what needs to happen?

Both those readings we heard this morning speak about journeys and the importance of trust and faith.

When the Israelites left Egypt, God didn't lead them on the easy and quick route through the Philistine country. It was only a distance of around 200 miles and could have been accomplished in a fortnight, but that's not the route they followed. That wasn't God's plan for them.

The easy road – the short road is not always the right road.

The easy road for us would be to turn a blind eye to any problems - to paper over the cracks.

If there's anger or pain from the past, we'll just ignore it – time's a great healer.

If there are people we disagree with or don't get on with, then tough – that's just life.

If something's holding us back or frustrating our mission and purpose, well that's not my problem, that's up to the Kirk Session and the Minister to sort it out.

That's what the easy road looks like. Easy and quick, but sometimes God takes us round a longer route. The journey is longer and harder, it might be more painful and difficult at times, but believe me, we're a whole lot stronger and better equipped when we reach our destination.

A second point about this Old Testament reading is that Moses took the bones of Joseph with him.

Joseph was an important part of the Israelites history and those bones held meaning and significance.

On Tuesday night I requested that one of the hymns be “Lord of all being, throned afar”. It's an important hymn for me – It reminds me of the most

important milestones in my life. It's familiar, comforting and reassuring – a lot like Joseph's bones.

Back in October last year, the Ministries Council asked me if I would consider leaving parish ministry to come into Interim Ministry. No - was my response. I've got the best parish in Scotland – great folk, beautiful part of the country, wonderful neighbours, fantastic manse, garaging for 4 cars, an AGGA, ensuite bathroom with a Power Shower, a large garden and so on, why on earth would I want to leave!

They came back to me in December and I stuck to my guns – No.

And then in late January they said “come and speak to us”. And over the weeks, in a strange and unexplainable way, God moved and spoke, and that was something I couldn't ignore.

But my problem was, I was far too settled – far too comfortable.

I had 12 grandfather clocks, 2 upright pianos, 1 full size grand piano, 3 vintage cars, and a lot more besides.

Since agreeing to be an Interim Ministry, I've sold and parted with 2/3s of all my belongings and that's been quite an experience. It's actually been quite liberating and I feel more flexible and movable than ever before – I am a portable minister! But there is always a price to be paid.

The hardest day was the day when both my Grand Piano and my favourite vintage car went. That was hard because these things were part of me. They were, if you like, the bones of Joseph. They spoke of my past, my interests and where I've come from.

Every church has its history, its stories, traditions, practises and customs that speak of its past and where you've come from. Some folk might think that sweeping all that aside and starting cart blanche is the best way forward, but actually that only causes grief and pain. It's much better to build upon what is good from the past. The traditions and customs, the identity which is unique to this church, this community, this place. And if there are things which are holding you back, things which prevent us from growing or anything which hinders the kingdom of God, then maybe we ought to leave them behind.

We travel this road together. We will strive to build upon what is good, and venture to change that which holds us back.

And finally, by day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.

Night and day; darkness and light; Easy times and hard times; Clear choices and difficult decisions - we'll probably experience them all over the next 18 months, but what's more important is the promise of God guiding by day and by night.

Sometimes it's tempting to hold fast to our own personal agendas. This is the way we do things – this is the way it's aye been.

But actually, it's not about our agenda. It's not about the Presbytery's agenda, it's not even 121 George Street's agenda, and it's certainly not my agenda.

It's God's agenda – God's plan which we rely upon for the journey.

At every stage of this journey we'll need to ask ourselves, is what we're doing furthering or hindering the Kingdom of God? What is our purpose as a church – why do we exist?

Is how we're living reflecting the love and the compassion, the generosity and openness, warmth and forgiveness of Jesus Christ? Are we following God's agenda, are we guided by God? Or are we sticking to our own agenda, trusting in our own plan, our own ways?

The God who guided them through day and night, who remained with them at every stage of the journey, hasn't changed. It's the same God who will remain with us on our journey, because this is a journey we do not make by ourselves.

Jesus summoned the twelve and sent them out in pairs. He gave them authority and instructed them to take nothing for their journey, no bread, no bag, no money in their belt, just a mere staff.

It's not so different from our Old Testament story. The mark of the Christian disciple was to be utter simplicity, complete trust, and a generosity which always gives and never demands. It's all about having faith as we travel together on a new journey in the months to come, a journey which fills me with hope and excitement!

Amen.

