

St Brandon's, Sermon for 30th August 2020.

Exodus 3. 1-15, Romans 12:9-end, Matthew 16:21-end

Go Forward Together

Alison Hobbs

Let us pray: Lord, help us to turn aside and look for you in the unexpected. Amen.

Hello lots and lots of screens – hello lots and lots of *people*! Here we are once again meeting on zoom, once again, gathered in worship: St Brandon's people. But there is a sense of restlessness: land is sighted, I hear, and St Brandon's boat is navigating towards the cove. How many will be in the first tranche to jump ashore?

In case I've lost you in metaphor: this is the last Sunday we will be exclusively on zoom together because next Sunday's 10:15 worship will be held in church with a congregation present, for the first time since late March. I'm going to look at today's readings in the light of that: what does it look like to follow God right now in St Brandon's?

Many people have seen this period of church closure as a form of exile, paralleling it to the experience of Moses leading his people across the wilderness.

I wonder which part you related to?

Moses turning aside to hear God in the burning bush? Has it been an opportunity to hear God more clearly, with fewer distractions?

Or God saying he has seen the suffering and is going to deliver his people? Has it been/is being a relentlessly tough time which you long God to bring you out of?

Or Moses being lumped with the task and his response, Who am I to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, and who shall I say has sent me?

It would be very understandable if Anna and the churchwardens, admin group, cleaning team, sacristons and many others, felt recent weeks had felt like being lumped with a tough task. There has been an awful lot of regulations to be digested, risk assessments to be formulated, then re-formulated because the regulations change – that happened several times – and much careful planning, in preparation for gathering again in the building. Anna has run evening prayer three Sundays as an opportunity to both worship as a small group, and test run the plan as it developed. We can be confident the service will be as safe to attend as it possibly could be but to ensure that, it will be a noticeably different experience to pre-Covid. We are not so much going back into church as going forward as a church, into new territory but with familiar companions and lots of experience and capabilities and faith between us.

So what's the problem? Isn't this the promised land moment we've been waiting for?

One, is how we can feel we are all together and fully participating in the worship when some will be physically present and some will be virtually present.

Another is how we decide which of those ways of being present will *we* be?

Is our mind made up:

we can, we want to, and will be in church?

We can't go even if we want to, so will be on zoom at home?

Or are we hovering, wavering, weighing things up?

Firstly, the practical question: How can we come together in the service, if we are not all in the church?

The techie group has been working in parallel with the other teams to achieve a system that will keep this zoom option looking very much the same for those who are not in the building, with the building being one of many screens, just like someone's house is now. However, the total number of devices on zoom will be much diminished when many are in church: and, while that is to be welcomed, it will feel different for those at home, liable to feel left behind and left out.

But we won't be left out for the near future: there will be a screen in church, so the opportunity to do readings and intercessions remains open to any, and will come over the church sound system the same whether we are standing at the lectern or through a screen.

Those in the church building may experience some music live, there will be some experimenting with instrumental, or single voices because regulations allow small groups to perform live but the hymns will continue to be pre-recorded and played over the sound system so it will sound just the same whether in the building or at home. A small advantage for the home folk is that they can sing lustily, where those in church must entirely refrain: there can be no congregational singing yet.

We'll come back to the question of deciding for ourselves whether we are immediate returners to the church building, or not. I'd like to come back to that through the readings.

A theme coming through today's readings is 'what does it look like to follow God?'

'Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised'

Jesus is a leader to be followed, his life leads to the cross and to denial of self no matter what the cost or dangers; are we called to do likewise? When we then hear him say to his disciples: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*, it begins to sound to me as though Christianity is one unrelenting martyrdom. And that is such a mis-reading, I feel sure -: its got to tally with loving and life-giving promises.

Let's unpack this more: Jesus has come to a point where he knows he is not going to be recognised by the Jewish leaders, they are not going to welcome him as the messiah, and so there are two things that remain to be done: to form a new community (that come to be known as the church), and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Peter, good old fallible Peter, is the key player here: in the preceding verse 18 (we started at verse 21), Jesus has told Peter that he is the rock on which he will build his church – Claire preached on this last week. Now he is not the rock but the stumbling-block, unable to accept that Jesus must die, looking to prevent Jesus going to his death as a free man choosing his destiny, choosing to give his life as a ransom for many.

No – says Jesus, you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' That is the temptation he is addressing when he speaks of taking up our crosses: we must do what we need to do, to find God; not be sidetracked or prevented by human concerns. The question is

not one of 'should we go to the church next week (what will others be doing, or say, or think?). The question should be: where will I find God most readily?

Taking up our cross is not to look for martyrdom – put up silently with pain - even embrace the painful as if it will do us good in itself; its not to deliberately put ourselves in the way of danger. Taking up our cross is the opposite almost: it is to put down our qualms, to cease to worry primarily about how we are viewed, to cease to be fearful where there no real danger, it is to cease being stopped by these things, instead, to uproot them, to have an 'I can attitude', to free ourselves to get up and go, seeking after God.

It is the action that goes with dying to self: letting go the ego, the niggle of how important I am to me, to know that I am far more important in God's eyes than I could ever be in my own, if I let go of me and follow.

Jesus gave his life for us to save us from our sins, not to make us invincible, our faith is not a magic wand. The church is very clear on this point: if you are clinically vulnerable, you must be proportionately careful, you must take that into consideration and be free to make appropriate choices.

How free is that?

Peter responds to Jesus' choice in a way we all understand. It is really difficult to watch others we love take a difficult path, make themselves vulnerable; we want to protect them, naturally; its really hard to let those we love make free choices.

Its equally hard, in a different way, not to be judgemental; to put aside what we think we know of another's situation and allow the possibility that we don't, and the certainty that it is God's business not ours, anyway.

Paul gives us the best picture of how we must conduct ourselves as we move forward together, it should be re-read and re-read and pondered. It is the foundational need to love one another – genuinely – that will keep us as one body; freeing each other up to find new ways to be church (the people) together. How we are church will evolve, it will take a long time and will have difficult, painful parts but lets look for the blessings, one of which is the ability with zoom to be together, to stay together, and that is for the long-term. For all its ups and downs, God has blessed and kept us through this uncertain time; he is, and remains, our one certainty.

Amen.