

Moving towards the Promised Land

David Fotheringham, 1 November 2020

High Street Uniting Church Frankston

Bible readings: Joshua 1:10-11; 3:1-6, 14-17; Matthew 23:1-3,11-12

O gracious and holy God, give us wisdom to perceive you, diligence to seek you, patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you, and a life to proclaim you. Amen.

I saw a cartoon drawing this week which showed a group of people dressed up in Halloween costumes, although one person was dressed like it was a normal day in 2019. One of the other characters was announcing: “and the winner of the scariest Halloween costume this year is... the person not wearing a mask.”

What a difference a year has made! We may be starting to ease our way out of lockdown, but we’re starting gently and small. The kids have not gone out trick-or-treating this year. I did see a couple of zombies walking around earlier in the day, but no-one carrying bowls of lollies. My kids have taken the line that they’re getting too old for it anyway.

I’m not sure whether High Street Times has spread very widely yet; when you receive it, you’ll see some of the plans we are making for December, Christmas and the New Year. We are taking it slowly. For some, it will be too slow; for others it will be too fast; we all have different experiences, different levels of confidence and anxiety, and different vulnerabilities or vulnerabilities within our households. In any case, the church is not allowed to have a physical gathering of more than 10 for worship indoors at present anyway; and there can be no sharing of morning tea if we did. For yours truly, this means planning a wedding with only 12 people present, ourselves included. Which might expand a little over the next few weeks; we’ll see! The point is, we are still proceeding with care, as much as a bit more freedom for one visit per day or a group in a park is most welcome.

We haven’t been following the Old Testament cycle of Bible readings, but they’ve actually been all about the time that the Israelites spent in the wilderness after God had led them out of slavery in Egypt through the leadership of Moses. It’s a startling thing that their transition took so very long - a complete generational change – which makes our time in the wilderness away from our familiar routines and spaces look relatively small.

For a long part of the Israelite’s hard, wilderness journey, there was a whole motif of grumbling from people who just wanted to go back to Egypt. And perhaps, if they had gone straight to the Promised Land without their sojourn in the desert, they would have just reproduced the same systems that they were familiar with from Egypt and fallen right back into forms of slavery. Instead, with enough time in between, they actually re-formed around the principles of the 10 commandments and the principles of loving God and loving neighbour.

They dug down to those basics even as they started to learn the new routines of their new situation. And I am pretty sure that for us the basics are * the fellowship that we enjoy with each other; * sharing in the worship of God; * encouraging others to join us on the journey; and * caring for the community around us. I hope that out of this wilderness journey that we've been experiencing we will emerge having learnt some lessons too, on our journey through extended times of relative solitude and different kinds of pressure. Which leads me to today's gospel reading.

Chapter 23 of Matthew's gospel is full of Jesus' critique of the Pharisees of his time. His first criticism is that the Pharisees are all about making heavy loads for people, while not lifting a finger themselves. They are the epitome of going back to the systems of Egypt, going back to making people work with heavy loads. Jesus rebukes them for dealing in external religious trivia while neglecting the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith. He criticises their focus on how they look on the outside while failing to attend to their 'inside', their faith, their love, their relationship with God.

This is something that a time in the wilderness is designed to address, as is seen in Jesus' 40 days in the desert as much as in the Israelite's 40 years there.

For us, there has been, and remains, the possibility for developing regular practices of prayer walks, Bible reading, pastoral phone calls, and appreciating the environment. These are some of the basics of our faith journey that are about what's in the "inside" for each of us, in our faith, love, and relationship with God, that then sustains our more communal life together and is the basis for healthy relationships. And like the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians, none of those things: prayer walks, Bible reading, pastoral phone calls or appreciating the environment – none of those things have been against the rules or risky for virus transmission.

They set us in good stead for serving the world that God loves. They set us in good stead for moving forward into the new ways of being that lie ahead of us.

I have no doubt that the Israelites had mixed feelings when it came to crossing the Jordan. Some would have been afraid of what the new situation was going to be like. Some would have been more than ready to leave the wilderness behind. The best outcome was for those who understood that things would indeed be different but God was with them; and God's steadfast love endures forever.