

Exodus 16

What is the most repeated command in the Bible?

Might think it's "Love the Lord your God..." or "Love your neighbour as yourself".

Actually, it's "do not be afraid".

Fear is a universal and common human experience.

Some of us are rich, some are poor; some of us are tall, some are short; some of us have hair, some of us have less of it.

But all of us feel fear and become anxious at one time or another.

But if the experience is universal, the triggers are many and various.

One person hates snakes but loves spiders; another person is afraid of spiders but has a pet snake.

One person feels crippling fear when they have to give a presentation at work or speak in front of others; another fears not being asked to do the presentation because they desperately want to prove their worth to their superiors.

One person fears never getting married; another fears losing their spouse.

One person lies awake at night worrying about losing their job and paying the bills; another person lies awake at night worrying about whether they've forgotten to pack anything for their holiday.

One person fears death and a terminal diagnosis; another person fears leaving their loved ones behind.

Some of those fears are trivial; some are more obviously misplaced than others; some are deeply serious and difficult; all are things which God is concerned about to a greater or lesser extent when he says "Do not be afraid".

Just over a year ago I was forced to start thinking about these things when I faced some health problems that led me to having a big operation last April.

I've recovered now –

but I've been left with a deeper appreciation of what it looks like for Christians to face uncertainty in the future.

We all face an uncertain future don't we –

none of us know what is going to happen tomorrow – but some of us find it easier to accept that than others.

But we will all face times in our lives when even more than usual we wonder what it looks like to trust God in these situations.

So what does God do with worriers who are struggling to trust him?

He puts them in the desert.

And he lovingly tests and teaches them.

Going to look at Ex 16: three lessons for worrying people.

1. The desert

So who can tell me where we are in the Bible story...

Read v1-5.

The Desert of Sin is its name, not a description of what goes on there...

When reading OT, important to remember that Bible doesn't leave it up to us to interpret it for ourselves.

NT tells us why this is here.

1 Cor 10:11 - These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.

These things that happened in a desert thousands of years ago are not irrelevant to 21st century Derby, as they might seem at first glance.

The desert is a fantastic picture of the Christian life.

Praise God for the desert!

Without it we wouldn't understand what is going on as we go through life.

In fact, even with it, we can still fail to understand.

What is the desert meant to tell us?

It's meant to tell us that we're not in Canaan yet.

We're not in the promised land, which for Christians is the new heavens and the new earth, when God will remake the world when Jesus returns and the dead are raised in the future.

We call it heaven sometimes, although strictly speaking heaven is where Jesus is now and where Christians go temporarily when they die, but it's not the ultimate hope for Christians – which is life after life after death.

That is the promised land.

What we are in now is the desert.

The problem is that Derby etc doesn't look like a desert.

In fact we have got pretty good at fooling ourselves that this could actually be heaven.

We have a nice house, a nice car, [whatever] – and then there is this massive sense of outrage when things don't go quite right.

And we might even find ourselves sounding a little like the Israelites in v3 – what’s the point of being a Christian if you still get ill or lose your job or watch your loved ones suffer or ...

We had a holiday recently and two of us got a tummy bug in the middle of it.

Not a massive set back in the general scheme of things.

But enough to just begin to take us down that road of thinking: what’s the point of this?

We’re Christian workers who desperately need a holiday; we’re going to end our holiday more tired than we began (which turned out to be more false prophecy, at least for me).

I thought God was meant to be on our side?

And God says very patiently: don’t get confused.

You’re not there yet.

You’ve been rescued from sin and death just like the Israelites, through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

But you haven’t arrived at your destination yet.

And life in the here and now isn’t just some kind of first class departure lounge

(details)

where we put our feet up in comfort and tap our fingers reading the paper and waiting for the main event.

It’s completely different from that.

It’s a training ground, a place of testing, a place of preparation for what is to come.

What is the point of it all?

v4 I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.

My number one priority generally is my own personal comfort.

And because I’m a bit like this, I tend to think that what I think is right.

So if I think my personal comfort comes first, then obviously God will think the same.

But surprise surprise, he is God and I’m not.

And that’s a good thing, because he’s got something in mind which is way more important than my personal comfort.

He wants me to trust him.

That’s what will get me ready for eternity –

because that's what eternity is all about –
knowing God, and knowing God means trusting him
and believing that what he says is true.

That's relationships 101, isn't it – trust.

And it's here that the character of God really becomes
important.

Because it's here that we need to remember that God isn't
merely someone who is sovereign and in charge –
he is good and loving and wise.

He knows what's best for me, better than I know myself.

He knows that for you too.

And it's not even just that he's in charge and he cares for
us –

he also knows the wisest and best way to achieve
what is best for us.

Sometimes feels like God is offering you a free holiday in
the Caribbean but he hasn't covered the travel and you're
going to have to swim there through freezing cold open
ocean.

Heaven is coming, but till then you're on your own.

But no: he has the best and wisest ends in mind; and the
best and wisest and most loving means to achieve those
ends.

The journey through the desert is the best possible journey
in order to prepare you the best possible way for the best
possible relationship with God that lasts forever.

So that's why we're in the desert.

It's not about personal comfort; not about having your
heaven now; not about having an easy life.

It's about being prepared for eternity.

2. The manna

So what does God do for the Israelites in the desert?

He gives them manna and quail.

The emphasis is on the manna.

There was an idea going round at one point that the word
kangaroo means "I don't understand you" in an aborigine
language – because that's what the aborigines said to
Captain Cook when he pointed at a kangaroo to ask what it
was.

But according to Wikipedia some linguist somewhere has
discovered that kangaroo is just the aborigine word for
kangaroo, which isn't quite so interesting.

But it's a bit like (or not like) that with manna – it means
"What is that?" – v15.

Because here is God's miraculous provision for the moaning Israelites.

So obviously out of place that there is no way it could have come through natural means.

Here is God demonstrating to the Israelites beyond all doubt that their bread comes from him and him alone.

That is the point of this.

So can you see he's doing more than feeding them.

He's doing more than satisfying their hunger.

He is teaching them about trusting him.

That is his big concern.

Not so much that they don't go hungry.

But that they should trust in him to provide for their hunger and everything else.

So he shows them that - by providing something that is obviously miraculous.

And then he shows them that - by regulating how they gather the manna.

Each morning they were to go out and collect as much as they needed for that day.

As much as they needed – v18 – everyone had exactly what they needed that day.

But no one was to keep that until morning.

It was one day at a time.

And that is God's big lesson for his people.

Not teaching them a technique to get what they want.

But teaching them to rely on him, one day at a time.

And in case we thought this was just an Old Testament thing, Jesus made it clear this was still true for Christians today.

There's a passage in Matthew 6 which is very similar to Luke 12 –

but it ends with these well known words:

33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [food, clothing] will be given to you as well.

34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Again, do you see the point.

You are worried about food and clothing, and God is not indifferent to those things –
but he has even bigger concerns in mind.

So seek his kingdom and he will give you what you need today –
and that means not worrying about tomorrow.
That is the lesson of the manna.

And it is a really hard lesson for worrying people to learn.

The Israelites struggled with it, as they decided to do their own thing and keep part of it till morning – but it was full of maggots and began to smell, v20.

And you might think, what's God doing, playing funny tricks with their food, but the food is not the point: the point is, will they trust God to provide day by day.

And when we take this together with Jesus' words about tomorrow, we can apply this to much more than food and clothing, we can apply it to everything.

When I was ill I was desperate for a road map for the future.

I wanted to know where this was all heading.

And no one can give you that road map.

You can have the best doctors and the balance of probabilities can be pointing in your favour but you will still be asking "What if..."

What if the news is bad?

What will I do?

How will I cope with it?

How will my family cope with it?

And God doesn't answer those questions.

He is much more interested in something bigger than that: he wants us to trust him today.

He says he will give us enough grace for today, and promises that he will be with us tomorrow.

That's what the Israelites had.

As each day went by, no one went hungry.

There was always enough.

But as they looked to the days to come, they didn't have manna in their barns, they just had the promises of God to hold onto.

And that is what God gives us.

Think of that worst case scenario, that event or series of events that keeps you awake at 3am; the things which haven't happened yet, which might well not happen, but which you can't help thinking could happen.

How will you cope?

Well, we don't know.

But when you get there, if you ever get there, God will certainly give you the grace to trust him and keep going.

That is the testimony of countless Christians who have gone through suffering.

Helen Roseveare – missionary in Africa – faced firing squad twice and survived - it took her months to get over not dying –

do you think when she was growing up and thinking of serving God abroad that she looked forward to the idea of standing in front of a firing squad?

Do you think she knew what she would do in that situation?

I doubt it – but she knew that God would be with her, and she trusted him, and that was enough when she got there.

So that is the manna.

No roadmap.

Just a promise.

Thirdly, and more briefly:

3. The Sabbath

And just as they think they are getting the hang of this manna thing, God introduces one further thing to keep them trusting, keep them on their toes.

When it comes to the Sabbath, everything changes.

Now you must keep some till morning, because tomorrow there won't be any.

Tomorrow is a day of rest.

And what is God doing?

Once again, he is using every means possible to teach his people that what really matters is whether they trust him; because life in the land is ultimately all about relationship. That's what he's preparing them for.

Why the Sabbath?

What do you think would happen if every day without fail the Israelites went out and found manna?

They would start to forget where the manna came from.

They would start to think that they had a right to the manna, rather than it being a gracious gift.

They would take it for granted.

And with that they would take the giver for granted, and stop trusting God.

A bit like children at Christmas: after you've seen the eighth set of relatives, it has turned from surprise and joy at presents, into them marching into the house and saying "where are the presents?"

So the Sabbath is one more way that God uses to say "this is about trusting and relying on me."

And whether Sunday is a Sabbath for Christians is not really the point here.

The principle of Sabbath is absolutely vital for us to grasp.

How are we at taking a day off?

Work patterns can vary, but it is so easy for us not to do that properly.

It can be very subtle: we may feel important if our work requires us to be available 24/7.

Even if you're a home maker, a house wife, a house husband, it may feel like you can't take a day off – but you can still introduce an element of Sabbath into your routines.

It's important that we do that because it's only when we are forced to stop working that we remember who's in charge.

It's easy to feel we can't possibly afford to do that – to be so worried and anxious about whatever it is that needs to be done that we can't possibly afford to stop and rest.

But actually not stopping and resting is itself increasing our worry and our anxiety – precisely because we are starting to think everything depends on us and not on God.

E.g. revising for finals.

God's way is best – not just matter of obedience but of what is best for us.

So: three lessons for worrying people – the desert, the manna and the Sabbath.