

## 11 Promised Land Joshua 1:1-9, 21:43-45

Well, last time we were with God's people they had made a real hash of things. God had lead them to the boarder of the Promised Land, they had dutifully sent in some spies to see what it was like, but, disaster! They had decided that the locals looked too big and too scary and so all of God's people had opted not to go in, all of them, that is, except for Caleb and Joshua who had remained faithful to God and urged the rest of God's people to trust God who had led them safely out of slavery in Egypt to freedom.

The people wouldn't listen and God judged the hardness of their rebellious hearts by promising them that as a result none of them except Joshua and Caleb would ever enter the Promised Land.

Now it's 40 years later, 40 years of wandering in the desert, 40 years during which a whole generation of God's people (apart form Caleb and Joshua) have died without ever setting foot in the Promised Land, and now it's time for the kids to be faithful where their parents were faithless.

As we come to the Old Testament book of Joshua, Moses has died and so God speaks to Joshua (Moses' assistant) and (affirming what Moses has said) God makes it plain to him that the task of leading God's people now falls on Joshua's shoulders.

Now, have you ever tried a job at home where it all went wrong? The kind of job where you needed all the children and your spouse to muck in and all work together? Leading is never easy, is it? Yesterday I was on a towing course learning how to tow a caravan – I was convinced that I would spend at least half the day steering the car in one direction and watching the caravan go in completely the opposite one.

Fortunately the caravan belonged to the people running the course so I knew that they would make sure I didn't do any serious damage, but when you're leading it is (at best) a little disconcerting if those following seem to be going in a different direction.

Back to your example. There you all were, putting up a shed, moving a climbing frame, erecting a tent – who knows what, but at some point, someone didn't pull their weight and instead of a success you were just grateful no one was filming it because you would have ended up on "You've been framed".

So, the next time you decide to put up the shed, or move the climbing frame, or erect the tent, you're just a little nervous, aren't you? Well, I suspect that Joshua must have felt a little wary too. Last time God's people were instructed to go into the Promised Land it ended in disaster, will it go the same way this time?

Well, remember, we now have Israel – the Next Generation; a whole community who have spent 40 years in a state of homelessness because of their parents faithlessness – "hopefully," thinks Joshua, "they have learnt from the mistakes of their parent's generation".

And the good news is that he's right. By this point they must have been looking forward to homes, farms, towns, stability all set (if you remember) in a land flowing with milk and honey. But there is more, there is something better, because God not only promises them a land to live in, he promises to live in it with them. Take a look at verse 9 where God says to Joshua, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

Perhaps in life we want God to give us lots of good things – health, wealth and happiness; a beautiful house, a lovely wife or husband, fashionable clothes, healthy children, fabulous holidays and impressive cars – a land flowing with milk and honey and on one level there is nothing wrong with any of those things.

But given the choice of having those things in our lives, or having God with us, I wonder which we would choose. We all know what answer the vicar would expect us to give – even the vicar knows what answer he expects of himself, but does your daily life and my daily life reflect a healthy desire for God to be with us over and beyond everything else that we might have?

You see, why was it important that God reassure his people that he was going to be with them wherever they went? Because they were going into a land flowing with milk and honey, but which was populated by big people in fortified cities, who were, quite frankly, pretty happy where they were and in no desperate hurry to hand over the land to the Israelites.

Taking the land for themselves is a big task. Remember back in the book of Numbers 14:44-45 after God had judged his faithless people they decided to go in to the Promised Land and try and take Canaan in their own strength? It all ended in disaster and they spent the next 40 years “in the wilderness” with their tails between their legs.

No, God’s people need God with them because we live real lives in the real world. When you turn to Jesus as Lord and Saviour you don’t wake up the next morning in a luxury villa with a Maserati outside and a private health plan – you live in the real world and, frankly, that means that sometimes the odds tacked up against you in your life will look pretty impossible.

We know that because back in the wilderness the odds hadn't got any better for God's people looking across into the Promised Land – the cities hadn't crumbled, the inhabitants hadn't invented McDonalds and all become obese, there is still no physical way that the Israelites could conquer that land in their own strength – but with God, nothing is impossible.

Before Moses died, he called Israel together and said, “The LORD your God himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you will take possession of their land. Joshua also will cross over ahead of you, as the LORD said. And the LORD will do to them what he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, whom he destroyed along with their land. The LORD will deliver them to you, and you must do to them all that I have commanded you. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:2-6)

Isn't that great? As God's people we can be assured that the Lord our God goes with us, he will never leave us or forsake us and of course we can apply that verse to our lives because in the New Testament book of Hebrews we read, “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”

So, here we actually have a corrective there against treating God as a dispenser of merely good things – we are to be content with what we have, not to love money, not to be distracted from what we need by what we want and how can we not be content with what we have because through Jesus and God's Holy Spirit we have God in our lives – and in our deaths – he is with us every step of the way.

Therefore, what is there to be afraid of, he is our Lord and our shepherd as we were thinking about at Chesterton last Sunday.

Now, before we see how things turned out, let's be honest, this conquest thing slightly bothers you doesn't it? God's people invading and slaughtering, it's all a bit awkward. OK, let's address it.

First, this is actually God's people returning home – Abraham, the father of the nation lived there long, long ago. Go back to Genesis 12:5 and you will read, “[Abram] took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.”

Now, granted, he wasn't alone in the land, but in Genesis 17 God promises Abraham that this land which he lives in as a foreigner will be granted to his descendants – it will be their homeland. OK, but what about the inhabitants of the land? Well in Exodus 23 God says to the Israelites, “My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out.” Now, it seems harsh and cruel to our ears, but it needs to be seen in context because the LORD continues, “Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces.”

This is the crux of the issue; it is God's judgement on the idolatry, on the sin, on the wholehearted rebellion against God of these peoples. If the Israelites had allowed these nations to continue to live in the land their idolatry and their sin would have polluted God's people (who, let's be honest, don't need much encouragement to rebel against God) and they would have lead them into great sin and frustrated God's plan to save humanity.

In Deuteronomy 7 God spells it out; “When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.

Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.

This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God.”

OK, so really this gives us a green light to wage holy war against any non-Christian country? No. As the Israelites marched in to Canaan God was judging the idolatrous pagan people who had encountered him through Abraham, but who had chosen to still live in open rebellion against him. But judgement is no longer our remit. Jesus instructs us not to judge one another, why not? Because it is his job. At the end of the age, when Jesus returns in glory and splendour and majesty, he will judge all people – his job, not ours.

But the fact is that back in Joshua God gives his people, the people chosen not because of anything special about them, but simply because God loves them – he gives them a place of rest and peace and joy.

And why is this so important? Because God is creating a people and a place where he will be with them, ultimately in the person of Jesus. A people amongst whom Jesus could stand up and read from their prophets; “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." And then announce; "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

God doesn't like judging, but he loves saving. God's plan is to rescue all nations through the blessing which comes through the great descendant of Abraham – Jesus. That was his promise – not slaughter, but salvation and the creation of a holy people set aside for God, a people made up not just of one ethnic and geographical group but ultimately of all the nations including Jews, Arabs, New Zealanders, South Africans, Germans, British – everyone who calls on Jesus as their rescuer.

But that takes faith, so as we close let's remind ourselves that God rewards our faith in him by showing us that our faith is well placed because he always keeps his word. How does it all turn out in the book of Joshua? Do God's people cross into the Promised Land? Is God with them? Joshua 21:43-45 gives us the answer, "So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled."

When we trust God, we can be absolutely certain that God's wonderful promises to us will be fulfilled – every one of them, because more than good things, we have a great God with us. Blessed be his name. Amen.