

“Big Question 6: Is God's way always best?”

Sunday 15 February 2009

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

Exodus 5:1-21

Psalm 1

Luke 14:25-35

Sermon

Our 'Big Question' for this morning is “Is God's way always best? Over the last five Sundays we've been following the story of Moses and God's work in his life ... and so far we've covered the first eighty years! Let's just re-cap where we've got to:

- 1 The people of Israel were slaves in Egypt. They were forced in to hard labour, working in the fields to grow crops, and making bricks to build the cities of Pithom and Ramases for Pharaoh, the King of Egypt. [OHT]
- 2 Because the Israelites were growing in number, Pharaoh ordered that all the boy babies born to the Israelites should be killed at birth, or else thrown into the River Nile and drowned. But when Moses was born, his parents hid him ... and when he was too old to hide, his mother made a basket and put him in it, and floated the basket on the river to see what would happen. [OHT]
- 3 Moses was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, and when he was old enough, he went to live with her in the palace, and was raised to be a Prince of Egypt. [OHT]
- 4 When Moses had grown up, he saw one of the slave drivers beating one of the Hebrew slaves, and he became very angry. [OHT] When he thought no-one was looking, he killed the Egyptian slave driver, and buried his body in the sand.
- 5 When Moses realised that he had been seen killing the Egyptian, he was afraid. He ran away to Midian, where he married a local girl, the daughter of the Priest of Midian. He raised a family, and became a shepherd for his father-in-law. [OHT]
- 6 One day, Moses was out in the desert, leading his sheep, when he saw a bush which was on fire, but not burning up. [OHT] He went to look more closely, and God spoke to him from the bush. God told Moses that he wanted him to go back to Egypt and rescue the Israelites from their slavery, and bring them out to freedom in a land of their own.

Now Moses wasn't too keen on this idea, and last week we heard how Moses argued with God and tried to find all sorts of excuses for not going back to Egypt - he wasn't a good speaker ... the people wouldn't believe him ... someone else would be better - but in the end, God showed Moses that his way *was* best, and convinced him that he should go.

So, Moses returned to Egypt ... and in the second half of Exodus 4 we read how he took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey, and with the staff of God in his hand he set off for Egypt. As he travelled to Egypt, God warned Moses that the task ahead would not be an easy one. The new Pharaoh was not going to be keen to let the Israelites go.

God sent Moses' brother Aaron to meet him in the desert, and when they got to Egypt, Moses and Aaron gathered together all the elders of the Israelites, and told them everything the Lord had said to Moses.

Moses showed them the signs God had given him and the people believed ... and because they now knew that God cared about their sufferings, they bowed down and worshipped him.

So ... now it was time to put God's rescue plan into action.

But let's pause for a moment and remember ... what were the Israelites making in Egypt?

Bricks!

So, just so that you can get into the story, I have a task for you. I want you to make some bricks. But since the Church Wardens, to say nothing of Jackie, might not be pleased with me if I brought in a great heap of mud and straw, we're going to do this the clean way!

Set task to construct 'bricks' with prepared cuboid nets on card, scissors and glue sticks.

OK ... bricks completed ... well done! Did some of you find that a bit tricky?

Examine results

Think how much harder it was for the Israelites, when they had to mix mud and straw, and cut them to shape, and put them out to bake in the sun ... and then, of course, once they were ready, they had to get on with the job and build with them! It was backbreaking work in the hot sun, with slave drivers cracking whips and forcing them to work hard. In chapter 1 it said that the Egyptians worked them 'ruthlessly':

"They made their lives bitter with hard labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labour the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly."
(Exodus 1:14)

Then along came Moses and Aaron ... God's team to the rescue!

Imagine how excited the people must have been. For four hundred years they had been in Egypt, since the time of Joseph, although God had promised their forefather Abraham a land of their own ... and for many of those years they had been slaves.

But now they knew that God had not forgotten them after all. God had sent Moses to help them, and had proved that it was true by giving them miraculous signs to show that God was with him. They were going to be free at last!

So Moses and Aaron went to see Pharaoh, and they demanded that he let their people go ... but Pharaoh did not know God, and refused to listen to them.

What was the result?

Harder work / No straw

Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and foremen:

"You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don't reduce the quota" (Exodus 5:7f)

They couldn't make bricks without straw, because straw held the bricks together ... but now they had to find their own straw, the people had to work even harder than before.

God had sent Moses and Aaron to rescue his people, and things got worse for them.

Was this God's great rescue plan ... to make matters worse? It was bad enough before, but at least they had straw. Now their work was even harder. What did God think he was doing? Had it all been a terrible mistake? Was Moses really not the man for the job?

So many questions ... so many doubts ... Was God's way really best?

Because the people had to gather their own straw, they didn't meet the quota. Since they couldn't make enough bricks to please their Egyptian masters, the slave drivers beat the Israelite foremen ... and the foremen complained to Pharaoh. Pharaoh just told them they were lazy and demanded more bricks. The work was getting harder and harder!

Set task to construct 'bricks' with prepared cuboid nets on cards ... glue sticks but no scissors!

When the foremen met Moses and Aaron, they complained bitterly to them:

"May the Lord look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us."

So today's Big Question is: "Is God's way always best?"

I wonder how you would have answered that question if you were Moses or Aaron ... or one of the foremen or one of the slaves? The people were suffering enough already, and now Moses and Aaron had come along and made Pharaoh angry, and everything was worse than it was before.

Wasn't that bound to happen?

Had God made a mistake?

Had Moses misunderstood?

I don't know whether you have ever been in the sort of situation where things have been hard, and you have prayed to God, and things just got worse? ... and you've asked other people to pray for you, and things got worse still. Sometimes we make a conscious choice to do things God's way, and we find the way is hard ... and we have more than a sneaking suspicion that if we had chosen not to go God's way, life might have been easier for us.

Is God's way always best?

Sometimes in the Psalms we read how David struggled to understand why it was that wicked men prospered, while good men had a hard time of it. Sometimes we wonder ourselves how it is that people who ignore God seem to be having a good time, while we try to live God's way and struggle. It all seems to be the wrong way around.

But the psalm we read this morning is a reminder that it will not always be so. Even if wicked people seem to flourish, it is only for now. The time will come when all people will receive their just reward from God. The wicked:

"... are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinner in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." (Psalm 1)

Bad choices often lead to bad situations, but sometimes good choices also lead to bad situations ... but in either case, God in his mercy brings us through. Once again we have to take the long view. Often we have to go through difficult times in order to come out of the other side stronger:

- An abscess may have to be lanced to draw out the poison.
- An apology may have to be made if a hurt is to be healed.
- A fever may have to run its course before healing comes.

Sometimes things have to get worse before they get better.

Pharaoh's unwillingness to let the Israelites go led to a sort of contest between Moses and Pharaoh ... more of that over the next few weeks ... but really Pharaoh was defying God himself. Even though his stubbornness made life even harder for the Israelites, it would lead, in the end, to a good result for them ... but at the time they could not see it.

Jesus said that it will be the same for those who chose to follow him and be his disciple. There would be times when it will be tough ... when following Jesus is much harder than doing the opposite. We have to count the cost of being his disciple, and remember that in the end we will receive our reward.

When Jesus said that his followers must 'hate their father and mother' he was using a Hebrew form of speech – hyperbole – exaggerating the message to make a point. What he is really saying in this passage is that we must put him first. We cannot be half-hearted.

It can be hard following Jesus when you are faced with losing your job.

It can be hard following Jesus when someone you love is ill.

It can be hard following Jesus when you are made fun of at school for being a Christian.

It can be hard following Jesus when there are temptations all around you.

If we want to be Jesus' disciples, we need to be ready to stick with him to the end. Like a King going to war without enough soldiers [OHT] ... or a man building a tower without enough bricks [OHT] - it's no good starting off with good intentions and then giving up half way through ... you will just be worse off than you were before.

Is God's way always best?

Yes it is – it is the way that leads to eternal life – but it is not easy. Jesus calls us to trust him through the hard times, and, as Moses led the Israelites to freedom after years of suffering, Jesus will lead us into the glorious freedom of being the children of God, and show us his plan for our lives.