

## All Saints Talk for Sunday 21 May 2023

Claire Parr - 'Calling the worshippers'

The 4th in our new series 'Journey to the Promised Land'

Readings: *Numbers 9:1-5, 15-18 and 10:1-10 John 4:19-26* The cloud, Tabernacle and Trumpets.

Last week, Tom talked about the importance of looking ahead, not turning around less we plough a wonky row. And don't get me wrong, there were plenty of wonky rows being metaphorically ploughed in the wilderness. Time and time again, the Israelites complained that they'd had it better off when they were in slavery in Egypt than what they were going through in the wilderness. Looking back like this, with only nostalgia, rose tinted glasses or unfavourable comparisons, wishing our current situation was more like it was then; that can be a really seductive trap, can't it?

I honestly believe that iPhone memories are probably about 90% percent to blame for the global population crisis. In case you don't have an iPhone, let me tell you about iPhone memories. When you swipe right from your homescreen to catch the latest headlines or a summary of your calendar or the verse of the day, you also see your daily curated iPhone memory photo, and it will inevitably be the most completely and utterly adorable, precious, painfully beautiful picture of when your child was in baby toddler or early childhood. This picture will look so cute, so little, so utterly different from your moody hormonal, complicated preteen or teenager, that you will immediately and earnestly think, I need another one of those. But the trouble with iPhone memories is that they do not come with noise. They do not come with any mess. They do not come with bone crushing exhaustion. A permanently activated cortisol stress response and the Iron Fist rule of snacks and naps. They do not remind you that the child's nickname was the destroyer. iPhone memories make us look back at other times with nostalgia, rose tinted glasses and unfavourable comparisons. And when we look back with only that lens, we might not only end up with another lifelong dependent, but more importantly, we settle for a bit of a half life, neither truly examining the past for both the joys and the struggles, being able to see and celebrate God's work in that time, nor can we fully embrace the delights, the opportunities and the challenges that we currently face; blinding ourselves to God's ongoing work and call in our lives.

It's not just true with children: we can fall into the nostalgia trap in any part of our lives, including and perhaps especially church life. Longing for times past when things were easier, livelier, more bums on seats. But churches have always been churches. And just as airbrush magazine covers and touched up Instagram photos can have a hugely negative effect on our understanding realistic and healthy bodies and faces, comparing our church to ministry at church and ministry to bygone days distorts our our perspective on church today. But God's Passover command is the exact opposite inclination to nostalgia, rose tinted glasses and unfavourable comparisons. God asks the Israelites to celebrate Passover, in order to remember the basis of their salvation, to recall the work that he's done in their individual and corporate lives, to turn away from the distraction of everyday living and return to worshipping Him. celebrating Passover and the many other festivals that came to be part of the Israelites yearly life were a way of cultivating a rhythm of life based on God's work in the world and the worshipping community. We no longer celebrate Passover in quite the same way as the Israelites and it's a whole other sermon to draw out the importance of Passover and Jesus's work on the cross. But through the New Testament lens and the rich tradition of church history, we can have a rhythm of life based on God's work. We of course have Christmas and Easter, our most important festivals, but the church rhythms like Ash Wednesday, harvest, Rogation Sunday like we had last week, Pentecost which is coming up. They are such rich touchstones in lives that are so often characterised by busyness and activity. Now, I'm not saying that religiously adhering to the church calendar is going to sort your spiritual life out. We know that religiosity can be a cold and deathly trap. But I'm simply asking what gives rhythm to your life. Because when we have a rhythm of life shaped by the pattern of God's work in the world and in our lives, worship is the natural outworking as we're brought time and time again into God's presence by remembering and retelling His saving work.

Well, if the beginning of numbers nine is about remembering what God has done in the past, the next part of the passage is about trusting God in the present. Verses 15 to 17 say, 'on the day, the tabernacle, the tent of the Covenant law was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening to morning, the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire. That is how it continued to be: the cloud covered it and at night, it looked like fire. Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out. Whenever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped'. The Israelites have been freed

from slavery, but they are a long way from the promised land. In fact, they are heading out into the wilderness. I think sometimes we can gloss over this part of the Exodus. Now I know later on the Israelites are disobedient and part of their consequences is that they wander in the desert for 40 years. But even before those incidents, even before it went wrong, the wilderness was part of the plan. I love that verse from Galatians. That says 'it is for freedom that you have been set free', and what deep truth there is in that. But freedom has brought the Israelites to the wilderness, and sometimes brings us to the wilderness, a place of difficulty, fear, discomfort, and trial. And even so, the wilderness is part of the plan. So what is that all about? Jenny Owens sings in her song 'if you want me to', 'it may not be the way that I would have chosen when you lead me through a world that's not my home. But you never said it would be easy. You only said I'd never go alone'. And certainly the Israelites are not alone. Every step of the way they have God leading and guiding them. A fire by night not only giving the visual assurance of God's presence, but practically they have light, warmth, protection. And the cloud by day gave that physical guidance but also a shelter from the really harsh wilderness sun. David Guzik writes, though Israel had been organized and ordered by God, though they had been cleansed, set apart, blessed giving and walking their priesthood, they still had to be guided by God every step of the way to make it to the promised land of Canaan. God did not do all those previous things to make them able to march towards the promised land without him, but to make every step in constant dependence on him. The wilderness is part of the plan.

I wonder if you're facing a wilderness today. Whether you're on the cusp, or trudging through, or just starting to see a glimpse of the Jordan River in the distance. When the Israelites do finally arrive at the Promised Land, spoiler alert, they cross over the Jordan and eventually do settle into the land that they so long yearned for. The Wilderness would finally be behind them. But do you know what? Things were never quite the same. God is gracious and merciful and ever loving and a temple becomes the new focal point for worship and community life in their new settled existence. But never again do they have God's presence so visible, so immediate, so imperative to their daily existence? Never again do they have the cloud and the fire leading their every footstep

And so I want to encourage you, as I myself have been encouraged in the preparation of this sermon, that the wilderness is part of the plan. I don't expect you or I will see a column of fire or a column of cloud, but when we are in times of deep difficulty and pain, and suffering or trial, those are sometimes when our dependence on God is the greatest, when the only thing we have to hold on to, to keep going to survive, is him. And though it may not feel it as the wilderness ranges around us: that is blessing upon blessing upon blessing.

So we've looked at remembering what God has done in the past, trusting God in the presence, and now we get to the trumpets. Oh, we're also preparing for what God has in the future. Because Dave and I were leading and preaching this service together, we did the first read through of the passage out loud, to bounce some ideas off of each other. And I don't know about you, but when we got to the bit about the trumpets, I have to admit, it all just sounded a little bit like Monty Python to me. Or maybe like that scene in *The Sound of Music* When Baron von Trapp summons each of his children with their own series of specific Toots on his whistle. But in lieu of mobile phone, pagers, or loudspeakers, getting a message out to the whole encampment of Israelites was no mean feat. And so came the trumpets. And so it seems to me that the trumpets actually function in a similar way to how our worship and preaching function now. The trumpets are sounded to gather the people to meet with God. They were sounded to lead the people forward in their physical and spiritual journey. They were sounded for good news and sounded for alarm. They were sounded to proclaim God's work. They were sounded to celebrate. We meet the trumpets again in One Thessalonians 4: 16 to 18, when the text says 'God's trumpet will sound, and we'll all be caught up together to meet Jesus in the air and be with the Lord forever.

There's also a promise with the trumpets. Much like the promise that where even just two or three are gathered in Jesus name that Jesus will be with us there, God promises to hear the trumpets and respond to the people's needs and situations. The trumpets are about being built up and prepared for the journey that is to come. In the same way, when we worship together, when we hear God's word explained and illustrated, when we pray together, these are the trumpet calls to the body. Who can't think of a time when they have sat here, been challenged, changed, bolstered, touched in this place; when we're gathered together with our brothers and sisters in

Christ. How many times have we moved on as a church through our experiences and testimonies. We may have mobile phones and all manner of communications now, but it's through worship, preaching and praying together, that the body can move as one.

So today, as we worship together, perhaps hearing the metaphorical or literal, if Dave, gets to it again, trumpets, let's go away thinking of ways to center the rhythm of our lives around God and His work, of finding the blessing of God's presence in the wilderness and of preparing for God's call on our lives to worship, to celebrate, and to move out into the journey and work that God has called us.