

Sunday 4th June 2023. A Vision of Fruitfulness. Tom Yacomeni

Numbers 13v17-33 Moses sends spies to explore the Promised Land

17 When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, "Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. 18 See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. 19 What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? 20 How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land." (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.)

21 So they went up and explored the land from the Desert of Zin as far as Rehob, toward Lebo Hamath. 22 They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the descendants of Anak, lived. (Hebron had been built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) 23 When they reached the Valley of Eshkol,^[a] they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs. 24 That place was called the Valley of Eshkol because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut off there. 25 At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

26 They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. 27 They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. 28 But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. 29 The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan."

30 Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."

31 But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." 32 And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. 33 We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

Over the last month we have been tracing the Journey of the Israelites to the promised land looking at the early books of the Bible from Genesis to Joshua.

We began with Abraham's calling to set out to a distant land, with God promising him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and that they would be blessed to be a blessing to all the nations. Abraham went in obedience and bought some

land in Canaan – the first financial transaction in the Bible, and there he was buried along with Sarah his wife, Isaac and Jacob.

We then saw how the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians and toiled for 400 years until God called Moses to lead the people across the Red Sea after Pharaoh finally let them go.

Last week we saw how God provided for them in the desert, with manna from heaven to eat and meat from flocks of quail that came were blown into the camp. We also saw that God's anger burned like fire when the Israelites grumbled and didn't trust him, saying they would be better off back in slavery in Egypt.

The exodus story teaches us much about our experience of discipleship today. We were once enslaved by the futile hopelessness of Godless thinking, but then Jesus liberated us through the cross and resurrection, opening up a new and living way for us to be reconciled to God, free to worship and enjoy his presence as a community.

But we all tend to think like the Israelites did that crossing the sea and getting saved is the fulfilment of the journey – when actually it is just the beginning. To claim the land of their ancestors, the Israelites still had battles to face and many miles to travel. Their sanctification would come as they learned to trust God and be content in his presence, led by him through the desert place.

In today's passage we discover what happened to those who could not see with heavenly perspective, and sadly counted themselves out of actually entering in to the promised land.

But what is the promised land for us as Christians? What are your hopes for the future?

Well this passage describes some key features of the promised land:

Firstly it is fruitful:

The Israelites returned from the Valley of Eshkol with a giant bunch of grapes as well as figs and pomegranates. Eshkol means Cluster and it was so big two people had to carry it on a pole. What an Iconic image of fruitfulness.

A massive bunch of grapes is now technically known as a *Caleb Cluster*. Check out these huge clusters! The one on the right is a natural cluster weighing over 7kg!



This is a cluster of bunches that really does take 2 to lift:



Jesus said 'I have called you to bear fruit, fruit that will last'. Galatians 5 lists the 9 fruits of the Spirit: Love, Joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The goal of our faith is all about depth of character. It is not about power, control, fame or resources.

The promised land is all about *people transformed in the presence of God*

As the Westminster catechism states, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

A person, family, community and therefore a society that respects and serves the Lord will automatically start to exhibit these fruits. Fruits contain seeds which spread out and multiply and the influence of a Spirit-fruit-filled Christian is enormous.

Our goal at All Saints has to be seeing people transformed in the presence of God and the way we do that is by simply sharing the life and message of Jesus. Our society is fractured and broken. There is no seed of inspiration left in the barn, and as society turns away from God and becomes more and more introspective, that will lead to further inequality, division and corruption.

Abundant fulness of life comes from looking to God, as we abide in the presence of Jesus – in other words when we welcome him into our daily thoughts plans decisions and actions.

The Good news we carry is that the Kingdom of God is here – if only we would turn from our selfish ways and seek God first.

As well as its fruitfulness what else do we notice about the promised land?

Secondly, it is about victory in the battle.

The promised land is not simply about physical rest – although that certainly appeals sometimes. Human flourishing involves overcoming challenges by the grace and help of God.

12 spies were sent in. 10 out of 12 were defeated even before they set out.

Caleb and Joshua counted themselves in to reaching the promised land. The other 10 managed to count themselves out. What did Caleb and Joshua do that was so different?

Caleb focussed on the fruit. The 10 focussed on their fears.

Caleb was faithful, the 10 were faithless, forgetting God's promises.

The name *Caleb* means wholehearted, but interestingly it also means 'dog-like' – doggedly determined, a faithful companion.

Joshua means Yaweh Saves – it has the same root as Yeshua – Jesus.

It is faith in God that saves us, not our own strength or competence.

Notice how as the 10 focus on their fears they start to lose perspective and start exaggerating and spiritualising the challenges:

'Yes the land is fruitful', they said, '**but**... The people who live there are powerful and the cities are fortified...'

Then they really get into a spiral of decline:

V32 'The land we explored devours those living in it... we saw the Nephilim there!'

Woah! This is serious catastrophising. The imagery is of land swallowing people with terrifying demi-gods waiting to devour all who dare to tread there.

So where do we focus when it comes to our vision for the Kingdom of God?

Do we just look at church trends and statistics? Or do we look to God to bring about a fresh outpouring of his presence and a new awakening in our land?

Do we conclude that the economic climate will devour the Rock project or do we doggedly put one foot in front of the other and keep moving forward?

Do we focus on falling church leaders or do we remember Jesus' promised 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it'

I think I know which Caleb would choose.

Caleb and Joshua saw the same challenges as the other spies did, but he chose 3 things that made him Kingdom ready:

- 1) He gave a good report. Kingdom people give a good report. Even if you think something is challenging or less than perfect – focus on the good things, keep praising the right and build others up in strength. Literally filling them with courage. Now that is not the same thing as covering up evil or being silent about abuse. If there is abuse or inappropriate behaviour in this church, then it needs calling out and correcting. But where it is merely dissatisfying, turn that to a holy dissatisfaction and sow seeds for how to improve things together.

- 2) Caleb counted himself in. 'We can certainly do it!'. He didn't say to Moses – you go up, I will be right behind you. He volunteered. The Kingdom is built on proactive people. If you always wait to be asked to help, maybe the Kingdom is missing out on your service.
- 3) Caleb focussed on the Lord. In the next chapter we read that Caleb exhorted the people to remember the Lord.
'The Lord is with us – do not be afraid of them!'

And yet the community talked about stoning them to death. Fear of man will ultimately be projected onto leadership. It's why political careers inevitably end up in blame and acrimony.

So are we with Caleb or are we with the Crowd?

Sometimes I admit I feel the fear and side with the crowd.

But Paul wrote to Timothy 2 Tim 1v7: 'For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. ⁸So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.'

Ben talked this morning about vision and vulnerability,

Fiona Day talked about waiting for the Lord to pour out his abundance,

In this moment we are living in we need the courage of the Lord, because we are living in a growing spiritual desert in the UK. But as we keep our eyes on the prize – the Kingdom of God full of people transformed by the presence of God, we can pray and wait, trusting that he will fulfil his promise and grow his church.

Let's pray.