

Joshua 3-4 Crossing the Jordan

You will no doubt have heard of Thomas Jefferson who was once US President. There is a record of a time during his presidency when he was travelling across the country on horseback along with some of his companions. They came to a river which had broken its banks due to a recent downpour. The swollen river had washed away the bridge and so the men were forced to wade through the rushing river on their horses.

There was a real sense of danger and each rider stepped up very nervously and cautiously, but the President urged them on. The first rider entered the water, struggling against the current and eventually made it safely to the other side. The second did the same, as did the third.

All of this had caught the attention of a traveller who was also trying to get across the river. After watching a few of them get across successfully, he turned to Thomas Jefferson and asked if he would take him across the river. The President agreed without any hesitation and the two made it safely across to the other side.

One of Jefferson's companions then said to him, "Tell me, why did you select the President to take you across the river?" The man was shocked, he said "I had no idea that was the President, all I knew was that on some of your faces was written the word "no" and on some was written the word "yes", his was a "yes" face."

I think Joshua's must have been a 'yes' face, don't you? If you remember, the Israelites were trying to get to the Promised Land of Canaan. They had waited a long time for this moment and at last, the time had come. God had told them it was time to take the land. But there was a problem in the form of a city named Jericho. The Israelites needed to have confidence, they needed to have faith, they needed a 'yes' face. Last week we looked at how Joshua had sent secret agents into Jericho to spy out the land. And the secret agents had come back with a good report. They said ["The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us."](#)

That must have been a confidence boost for Joshua. That's just the kind of thing that you need to hear before you step out in faith for God. It's good to know that God is with you. Of course, God had already told Joshua this. ["No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. \(1:5\); Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go \(1:9\).](#) But I guess it's always nice to be reminded. It seems that Joshua needed a lot of encouragement. Several times in the opening chapters of Joshua he is told to "be strong and courageous".

Actually I think that Joshua was strong and courageous, because he went forward with faith. So if you view Joshua as a fearless leader then obviously, he is strong and courageous, but even if you think Joshua was shaking in his boots, doesn't that make him even more courageous to step out in faith as he did?

So Joshua leads the Israelites to the edge of the Jordan and there they set up camp. Notice that they don't immediately go straight from Shittim, right across the Jordan and onwards to Jericho. This is a more strategic move. They get as close to the river as they can and then they wait for further instructions. That's what you do if you have a big group of people isn't it?

We held a joint youth weekend between Ashurst Drive Baptist Church and Swavesey Baptist Church back in October last year. On the Saturday we all went into London for a treasure hunt. We broke into groups and at certain points we arranged to meet up again. So we first arranged to meet up at Gants Hill Station, then when we got on the tube we arranged to meet at various points to make sure we had everyone with us but the instructions about what we were going to do in London were not given until we all gathered together in Leicester Square.

So the first stage for the Israelites was to get from Shittim to the Jordan. Then when they are all assembled, before anyone moves anywhere they are given instructions. It's just like a school teacher on a school trip. The teacher will explain where they are going next and quite often the teacher might say "follow me" or "follow Mr. or Mrs. So and so". They might also say "I'll go first, I don't want to see any of you running off ahead of me." And that's exactly what the Israelites are told:

"When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. ⁴ Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about a thousand yards between you and the ark; do not go near it."

(Joshua 3:3-4)

The ark of the covenant was the most treasured possession of the Israelites because it was a symbol of God's presence. It contained the stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses. The Israelites were told to follow the ark, the symbol of the presence of God. Just as God had led them through the wilderness with his presence displayed by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, so God would go ahead of them and lead them across the Jordan River, his presence symbolised by the ark of the covenant.

So God will go before them and he will lead the way, but the Israelites needed to exercise their faith. Did you notice that? V8 God said to Joshua "Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: 'When you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river.' "

Often God will ask us to take a step of faith before he acts. And when we do that, get ready to see what God can do. Joshua told the people that God was going to do amazing things and that is certainly true.

The Narrator tells us that the Jordan was at flood stage all during the harvest. So that makes it clear that we are not talking about a time of year when the Jordan might dry up. We're talking about a lot of water, a flooded gushing river to get across. Yet as soon as the Israelites take that step of faith and the priests step into the water, the water stops flowing and the Israelites are able to cross on dry ground. And we're even told where the water went. ¹⁶ the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (the Salt Sea ^[b]) was completely cut off. I imagine that this must have been headline news in the area. The people in the town of Adam would have noticed that they suddenly had a lot of water, and the people further downstream would have noticed that they didn't. But I'm left wondering why it was necessary for the Israelites to cross on dry land. Couldn't God have just told them to wade across or perhaps go to a ford downstream, or God could have even led them to the river at a time of year when it wasn't flooded and was easier to cross.

Well perhaps this way it was another reminder for the people that God was with them and he was leading them. They would take the Promised Land in God's strength, not their own. And I think also God spoils his children sometimes. All parents like to spoil their children from time to time don't they? So we shouldn't be surprised that God likes to spoil his children from time to time. When the Israelites were wondering around in the desert you'll remember that God provided food for them in the form of quail and manna. This is what is said about the manna which was a bit like bread.

Exodus 16:31

³¹ The people of Israel called the bread manna. ^[d] It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.

In Numbers 11 we also read:

⁸ The people went around gathering it, and then ground it in a handmill or crushed it in a mortar. They cooked it in a pot or made it into cakes. And it tasted like something made with olive oil.

God didn't only provide basics for his children, he provided cakes! Cakes that tasted sweet like honey. Pat Took pointed that out to me. Not just basic bread for God's children, oh no, honey cakes! God spoils his children.

So if he wants to, why shouldn't God allow his children to cross the river on dry ground?

And then we see the school teacher principle at work again as all the Israelites cross over the river while the ark remains in the centre of the river. It reminds me of how a teacher stands in the middle of a road until all the children are safely across. You see God goes ahead of his people, leading the way. God is with his people and spoils his people. And God also goes behind his people and protects his people.

We have a Promised Land that is out there to be won. We have a commission to go and make disciples (Matt 28). In a context of mission God says to us "I am with you". But sometimes we need reminding of that. Sometimes God is gracious enough to give us a confidence boost. When the Diaconate met to listen to God, God prompted us to get out there and reach people for him. It's not a new thing really, it's what Jesus asks us all to do.

God is encouraging us to go. The time is now, let's step out in faith and watch in amazement as we see what God will do. Those people you have been praying for, your friends, your work colleagues, your neighbours, your family and you've been praying that somehow, somehow, they would come to know Jesus. And you believe that somehow God will meet them, somehow God will break in and they will come to know Him. Well maybe you need to step into the water. In a few weeks time it is Back to Church Sunday. You have an opportunity to invite someone who doesn't normally come to church, to come along. Be strong and courageous, step out into the water and see what God can do.

Perhaps there is something you feel God has been speaking to you about, something you feel God wants you to do. Be strong and courageous, step into the water and see what God can do.

Perhaps you find it difficult to get out of your comfort zone to reach someone for God. Be strong and courageous, step into the water and see what God can do.

Do you want to see God do amazing things in this area? We need to step out in faith. The priests needed to step into the water. You have an opportunity to do the same.

When we do what we can, God does what we can't.

As we prepare for Communion, I just want to have a quick look at one other significant thing in this passage.

(Joshua 4:1-6)

¹ When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, ² "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, ³ and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight."

⁴ So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, ⁵ and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' ⁷ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

They were told to take stones from the river as a reminder. Have you ever done that? Have you ever taken a stone from a place you have been to? Ruth and I have a couple of stones in our house. They look a little unusual and sometimes people will ask 'what are these stones?' And we tell them. We brought them back from the top of Mt. Vesuvius, the volcano that destroyed the city of Pompeii. These stones are a reminder of our trip to the volcano and to Pompeii and they also allow us to tell other people about it.

I imagine these stones the Israelites must have been a bit bigger than these if they needed to carry them on their shoulders and perhaps they needed to be. The point of these stones was to be a reminder to the people so as when future generations asked 'what are those stones for' they would be able to tell the story of what God had done.

It inspires us when we hear stories of what God has done. I would encourage you to tell your story of what God has done in your life, just as Steff has told us her story this morning. For the Israelites this was important because it would take a long time before the Promised Land was completely theirs. There were many battles ahead, and from time to time the people of Israel may have needed to be reminded that God was with them.

We have a reminder here in the symbols of bread and wine of what God has done for us and of his continued presence with us.