

READING

1 Samuel 7:3-12

SERMON

'Thus far has the Lord helped us' (1 Samuel 7:12)

Marking an occasion. Yesterday I went to the 21st Birthday of the Billy Owen, who is the son of my cousin Raymond. It was marking in his family a passage into adulthood – a milestone. We all mark our birthdays in one way or another – some even try to forget, but there is always someone around to remind you that another year has gone round and that you are another year older!

Here at ADBC we celebrate another year of the church getting older, but is that true, does a church get older and older? Well, it is an anniversary. We mark that with a Gift Day, a time when we can give to the work for God here over and above our normal giving. As we have heard., all but 10% of the money given on this Gift Day will go into the Partners Building for Ministry Fund.

However in the time of Samuel that we had our reading from, they did not mark occasions with sending cards to each other. Very simply because paper was in short supply – it hadn't been manufactured yet and also there were no post boxes to send your cards from! So they would mark special places, special occasions by erecting a stone. Jacob was one of the first to do this when God has spoken to him in a dream. We read

“Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.” (Genesis 28:18-19 NIV)

Bethel meaning 'House of God'. The stone was a marker of a great event in his life.

So in the events that we read about today the culmination was the erection of this stone called Ebenezer. For years and years people sang a hymn where you could always tell if people were actually reading the words and the words were registering or not. The first verse went

**Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of Thy redeeming love.**

Nothing untoward there. And then came the second verse

**Sorrowing I shall be in spirit,
Till released from flesh and sin,
Yet from what I do inherit,
Here Thy praises I'll begin;
Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Here by Thy great help I've come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.**

There it is in line, four - **Here I raise my Ebenezer.** This was the point at which some people would begin to giggle, some looked confused and for others it had not even registered that they had sung it. And this morning we read, verse 12

“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far has the LORD helped us.”” (1 Samuel 7:12 NIV)

But before we get to that let us look at the steps that led up to the raising of the Ebenezer. Firstly there was a

Challenge – verse 3

“And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, “If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.”” (1 Samuel 7:3 NIV)

The challenge was to follow God with all of their being. It is so easy, still in our society, in our culture to follow God with half of one’s heart. I speak so often to Christians who are not living a lifestyle that is honouring to God. They know it but they still carry on with it. They have two gods in their life, the God of heaven, the God who sent Jesus to die for each one of us. The God who rose Jesus from the dead on that first Easter Sunday to show that he has power of death and also that the sacrifice that Jesus made for us was accepted. Because of this we can know forgiveness of sins and a clean life and are assured of going to heaven.

But in their life there is that other god. For some it is the god of materialism, for others it is the god of sex, for a third it might be the god of pornography. It can even be something good like putting football as the number one thing in one’s life. It is anything that gets in the way of our relationship with God, the God of the Universe, the Saviour of the Universe. Jesus said

““No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and”
(Matthew 6:24 NLT)

It does not matter what the ‘and’ is, you cannot do it. So the challenge that day given out by Samuel was in verse 3

“...“If you are really serious about wanting to return to the LORD, get rid of your foreign gods and your images of Ashtoreth. Determine to obey only the LORD; then he will rescue you from the Philistines.”” (1 Samuel 7:3 NLT)

It was to wholeheartedly follow God. To make sure that God is number one in you life and him only obey. Are you prepared to do that today? You may not even said that you will follow God with all your heart – you are still clinging on to another god, only you will know. Today God is wanting you to follow him, but it is with all of your heart and life and not just the ‘religious’ bit.

For some you may have said that you follow God, you may even have been baptised, but you realise that you have slipped. You know that you do not really follow God wholeheartedly, other things get in the way. Do you take the challenge today to put down, to get rid of other gods and just to follow Christ – to follow his commands, to live as he would want you to – only you can answer that question?

But then came

Confession – verse 5

“Then Samuel said, "Assemble all Israel at Mizpah and I will intercede with the LORD for you." When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah.” (1 Samuel 7:5-6 NIV)

We need to confess. When we do something wrong, we need to ask God for forgiveness. For the Jews of the Old Testament there was the ritual of sacrifices and that ceremony that they had to go through. Ceremony gives something importance. When Anton and Maria were with us, one day we went to Buckingham Palace and as we approached at around 12 midday, the pavements were heaving with people. What was happening? It was changing of the guard, but because it is done in such a ceremonious way – it has developed into a tourist attraction – it is important!

At times for us confession is too easy, too cheap. Because Jesus came and died for us once and for all, we do not have to offer sacrifices – Jesus did that on the cross when his own body was our sacrifice. This makes forgiveness very costly, but at times it can mean for us that we can take confession too lightly.

That day they poured out water to symbolise the cleansing of God in their lives. As Baptists we use water to symbolise our death to sin and our resurrection to eternal life. That is part of baptism. However the water in baptism is also a symbol of us being cleansed by God. We need that confession, that cleansing, especially if we have realised that we have had two gods – that we have not been following God 100%. Let us pause at this point.

Some of you may want to give your life to Christ – in a moment of silence do that now. It does not have to be spectacular. Just do it quietly now.

For others if may be a need to confess to God the things you know are holding you back from a full on relationship with him

But what happened next – all went well. Well, it was **Conflict** – verse 7

“When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. And when the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines.” (1 Samuel 7:7 NIV)

When we are serious with God – there will be conflict – Satan will not like it and he will be in conflict with us. When we are half-hearted he loves it because we are no threat to him. The Israelites that day were full on with God and so were a threat to the Philistines. When we are full on with God, we are a threat to the devil and he will attack.

This can make us fearful, but notice what the people did, verse 8

“They said to Samuel, "Do not stop crying out to the LORD our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines." Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on Israel’s behalf, and the LORD answered him.” (1 Samuel 7:8-9 NIV)

They went to God for their help. They prayed and God listened and answered. Do we always go to God for answers? Now the answer may be for us to use the brain that God has given us. That day God answered in a miraculous way, verse 10

“While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Car.”

(1 Samuel 7:10-11 NIV)

For us as a church there have been miracles right from the outset. The miracle that the first people here bought 2/3rd of an acre, bought all this land so we could build a church, many halls and then not one but two manses. Hopefully in our individual lives we have see God at work – at times miraculous, at time us using the minds he blessed us with and because he has said to use them.

In recent years we have seen what I would say are miraculous things. There is the coming among us Darren and Ruth. We did not know the effect Darren would have on us musically – it has been a miracle. This afternoon the young people are leading our Praise Party after our Come-2 Gather meal – another miracle. That would not have happened 5, 6, 7 possible 10 years ago.

Then we have the miracle of growing in numbers and if you have only been here for less than 5 years, then you are part of that miracle. We follow a God of miracles and as each anniversary comes round we need to mark it. We do this as we have said with our Gift Day monies.

That day for Samuel and the people of Israel, they put up the stone, and called it Ebenezer, which means the *stone of help* or as Samuel says, verse 12

“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far has the LORD helped us.”” (1 Samuel 7:12 NIV)

Thus far has the LORD helped us. And we here can testify to that. God has helped us here in the past with people, with buildings with building projects, with reaching out to others. God too will be with us in the future, with people, with buildings, with reaching out to others. This year our Ebenezer is the Second Manse, not that I am suggesting we call it Ebenezer – we have had enough trouble getting the number 83B settled, but that another story and not for this morning. 83B Ashurst a landmark in the history of this church and a time when we can say ‘Ebenezer’ – **“Thus far has the LORD helped us.”**

He has helped us both individually and corporately this far. So we have this base and hope and strength to look to future knowing that we do follow a God of the miraculous, but we need to be prepared for his

- Challenge to follow him wholeheartedly
- Confess when we do get thing wrong and go against God, but to mean the confession remembering that it cost Jesus everything
- Conflict will occur when we are serious in our relationship with God, when we have a full on relationship with him, Satan will not like it and this will lead to conflict. But that is when we turn to God for help

Today we raise our Ebenezer, we have that in 83B. **Thus far has the LORD helped us.** Let us use this to spur us on to

“...do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10 NIV)

And one of those good works is to

“...go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” (Matthew 28:19 NIV)

To talk to other people as opportunity arises about the relationship we have with God.