

2019-01-27 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Revd Canon William Price
Numbers 9: 15 – end; 1 Corinthians 7: 17 - 24

When I looked at the lessons set for this service, I felt a bit worried as to how I could preach a sermon on them, and I still am. But let's first look briefly at what they said.

The first lesson from the book of Numbers (chapter 9, verses 15 to the end) told us of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire in the sky by night which guided the people of Israel in their exodus from Egypt through the wilderness. God's appearance in the awesome cloud of his glory was a constant feature of Israel's life in the wilderness. The cloud appeared as the people left Egypt and settled on Mount Sinai during the making of the Covenant between God and his people. When the Tabernacle was complete, God's glory filled it. Through the journey the cloud was with the people. When the cloud moved the people broke camp, and they stopped at the place where the cloud settled. And when it was night the cloud became fiery, so it was always visible. So every move was made in response to the command of the Lord. What message does that story have for us today? On a journey many people today will put their trust in a sat-nav, or in my case an Ordnance Survey map. God does, I am sure, still guide us, but not in so obvious a way as by providing a cloud of fire.

The second lesson from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians had the theme of staying as you are. We can replace the words about circumcision by adapting them to say that if one was a Jew one should remain a Jew. If one was not a Jew one should not become a Jew. One paraphrase sums it up as 'Stay where you were when God called your name'. Remain a slave if you have to, although take free status if it's possible. By following Jesus all, slave or free, will experience a marvellous freedom beyond their wildest dreams. After the end of tonight's reading, St Paul continues that those who are unmarried should remain unmarried, and those who are married should remain married. In other words 'Stay where you were when God called your name'. It all seems very static, but remember that St Paul was expecting the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world to happen at any time, very, very soon. If you thought that the world was going to end perhaps next Tuesday it would make sense to suggest that you should stay as you were. Of course we're still waiting for the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world. It could happen on Tuesday, but the odds seem against that. That day will come, but we don't know when. Even Brexit might happen first! In what is clearly a different situation, St Paul's advice to 'stay where you were when God called your name' would make life very tedious, but his implied reminder that, as the collect says, '[God's] service is perfect freedom' remains true for ever.

So if God guides us, if not through a cloud and a fiery pillar, but through prayer, conscience, and advice from other people, and if we live in the freedom which Jesus gives, what else matters? Later in the chapter from which our second lesson came, St Paul, who could be very down-to-earth, tells the Corinthians that he wants them to be free from anxiety.

Anxiety or worry is a very common factor in life, and it is understandable. We live in a dangerous and uncertain world. Bad things can happen to people, and we have no way of predicting when or to whom. Put these two factors together and some degree of worry seems almost inevitable. Worry is a fact of life, and we may never conquer it. But worry is a dangerous and potentially deadly enemy. It wastes energy, undermines happiness, and it can bring life to a standstill. But there are practical ways to counter it. We need to overcome worry, rather than be overcome by it.

In the midst of our worries we need to remember that we are not alone. Everything does not depend on us. We have a heavenly Father who is with us all the way. He has brought us safely to this point, and we can place the future in his hands. All God expects of us is that we do our best. One of the most foolish things that we can do is sit and worry. It achieves nothing. **As Jesus said 'Can any of us add an hour to the span of our lives by worrying?'** If we have a problem to solve, a job to do, let's do it. If it is beyond our reach, if there's absolutely nothing that we can do about it, let's have the good sense to turn it over to God and go on to other matters.

There's a useful prayer by Reinhold Neibuhr: **'God, give me the courage to change the things I can, the serenity to accept the things that I cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference'**. **PTO**

In our campaign against worry, we need to train ourselves to live one day at a time. Jesus, who could also be down-to-earth, ended his teaching on this subject with wise words: **‘Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today’**. Jesus did *not* mean that we should not look ahead and make sensible and realistic plans for the future. Some problems can be anticipated and solved before they ever happen. **As the old proverb reminds us: ‘An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure’**. A trip to the doctor at the right time could save months of worry. Foresight is a gift of God to us.

There are of course times when it is natural to worry. But many, if not most, of the things we worry about never happen. Imaginary problems are usually more difficult to solve than real ones. One day at a time. No one is strong enough to carry today’s real burdens and tomorrow’s imaginary burdens at the same time. But remember that God is with you, that it is pointless to worry about things over which you have no control, and that it is good to live one day at a time. We might not completely solve the problem of worry, or anxiety, but at least we could handle it, instead of allowing it to handle us.

Of course there are real worries, real anxieties – family problems, illness, relationships, work, money – and no one can escape them completely. But life has many blessings too. God has given us a good world in which to live. God wants us to enjoy life, life in all its fullness. Above all God has given us Jesus to be our guide, our Saviour, our brother, and our friend.

Blessed be Jesus Christ, true man and true God, and blessed be God in his angels and in his saints. Amen