

[Joshua 3:1-17](#)

You have never been this way before (verse 4a)

During this time of pandemic a quotation from Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' has become popular in some circles. I'd like you to hear it.

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.

"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

So this reading is helpful for us as we face the ongoing crisis of the pandemic. To be sure, there must have been excitement and anticipation among the Israelites as they stood on the threshold of the Promised Land alongside their natural trepidation.

We only have the trepidation. But we have never been this way before (although the Church has faced many a plague in previous centuries, but mostly in pre-scientific times when life was short).

So what clues does this story offer us as we today stand sometimes 'Bewitched, bothered, and bewildered' as Rodgers and Hart put it?

Clue 1: The ark of the covenant ... follow it ... then you will know which way to go (verses 3-4)

The ark of the covenant was the portable sign of God's own portable presence with the Israelites. So if they are told to follow the ark of the covenant and thus know which way to go, it must mean that the presence of God is going ahead of them. They simply have to go in that direction, too.

Follow the sign of God's presence – what does that mean for us? I'm tempted to say it was easier for the Israelites. They could see the ark of the covenant. How do we discern the presence of God?

I think one thing it means is look for where we are seeing God's people doing Jesus-like things and take inspiration from there. It's so hard at times just to keep the current show on the road, but there are encouraging examples of what God's people are doing at this time that might help us take heart and also be challenged about our way forward with Jesus.

Premier Christian Radio collected [several stories](#) of what Christians have done during the pandemic.

There was the 'pizza pastor' – a minister who (inexplicably to me) found himself with more time on his hands, so he took a second job as a pizza delivery driver, and had pastoral conversations with people when he called with their orders.

There was the hospital chaplain who, knowing that families could not see their loved ones in hospital, took written messages and printed emails to patients on the ward.

There were the churches in Devon who purchased an old black cab with which to ferry elderly and vulnerable people to medical appointments. Why a black cab? Because the screen between the driver in the front and the passenger in the back made it COVID-safe.

They told the story of the Northern Irish pastor who caught coronavirus, was hospitalised, and moved to intensive care. He heard the audible voice of God saying to him, 'You are more than a conqueror,' and began to recover. He began to tell his story in the hospital and beyond.

Or – one more – the lady in Bolton who set up a free fruit and veg stall outside her home. She would order more fruit and veg each week than she needed, and give away the excess to those in need.

Look for the ark of the covenant and follow it – do these stories inspire us to find a way forward with the presence of God at this time?

Clue 2: Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you (verse 5)

Remember that at this point in the story the Israelites don't know the miracle God is going to perform. They simply know that they must follow the ark of the covenant, the sign of his presence.

But in telling them to consecrate themselves, because the LORD will do amazing things, Moses ups the ante. We can speculate what precisely they did to consecrate themselves, and perhaps it was the same as when they came to Mount Sinai, where they washed their clothes and abstained from sexual relations (Exodus 19:14-15).

However, the detail is less important than the fact. Consecrate yourselves, says Moses. That is, set yourselves apart for the holy purposes of God.

To be sure, God can and does use people with a morally dubious track record such as King David, but generally he calls for consecration before doing something wonderful, and he calls his people to a life of holiness.¹

So how do we set ourselves apart for the holy purposes of God? Is it just by avoiding bad things and being a good churchgoer? No, it's more than that and better than that.

One of my late father's favourite authors was the mid-twentieth century Christian novelist and playwright Dorothy Sayers. The other day, I came across some of her words which I believe shine a light on what consecration is. In an essay entitled 'Why Work?' [she wrote](#),

The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk & disorderly in his leisure hours & to come to church on Sundays. What we should be telling him is that... he should make good tables.

Make good tables. Do everything you do to the glory of God. From how we work at our laptops to how we cook the dinner, we are do it all with a Christlike attitude.

Yes, overtly religious actions like prayer are involved too, but if we consecrate ourselves to God it will be as much in the way we conduct our ordinary routines as anything else.

Do we want to see God do something wonderful in our day, as we find ourselves in a place we never have been before?

If we do, let us consecrate our everyday actions to him.

Clue 3: Tell the priests ... stand in the river (verse 8)

When the Israelites enter the wilderness, God parts the Red Sea. When they leave the wilderness, he parts the Jordan.

Symmetry? Well, yes and no. It was usually easy to cross the Jordan. A flood tide was the exception.

But more significantly, compare the preparation that the Israelites make. At the Red Sea, they are instructed to stand still and they will see the glory of the

Lord. Here, they don't stand still. The priests carrying the ark of the covenant must stand in the river before the waters are parted.

In other words, their faith has to grow from the level it was at before. They cannot continue in their existing ways, however well they have served them up to now. Once more, God takes them out of their comfort zone.

And that makes sense. If God is going to do something amazing, how can they stay as they are? Of course they will have to be taken out of their comfort zone.

It is the same for us. Can we really continue to potter along the way we are? Whatever level of faith served us in the past, it is surely plain that repeating that will not serve the present age.

So although it's tiring just to get the basics done at present with all the extra policies and duties we have to put in place, if anyone thinks that our goal can simply be to return to 'normal' once the pandemic is over, then that person is not serving the kingdom purposes of God.

If each of us took a moment to reflect, we would probably realise that there are areas of our lives where we don't find it a problem to trust God. But there are other parts where we know it's a struggle to hand over to God. What if the key to God doing something new and special in our day were that we needed to start trusting him in areas of our lives where we are currently holding onto tightly?

Is it money? Is it our children? Our health? Our church? Our job? Our friends?

And what if God is whispering to us, urging us to relax our iron grip on these things and entrust them to him?

If we do, then maybe we just open things up for him to do something amazing in our day.

Conclusion

So – look for the signs of God's presence and go there. Dedicate even the most ordinary parts of your life to God. And stretch your faith.

I began with some rather sobering words from The Lord of the Rings. I want to close with some hopeful poetry from the same source.

“All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

¹ These last four paragraphs depend heavily on David G Firth, *The Message of Joshua*, p56f.