

Dear Friends,

For my first sermon in my last circuit I chose to preach from Joshua chapter three, where Israel is about to enter the Promised Land. The chapter begins with these verses:

¹ Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. ² After three days the officers went throughout the camp, ³ giving orders to the people: 'When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the Levitical priests 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 two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it.'

⁵ Joshua told the people, 'Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.'

'You have never been this way before'. Those words could describe where we are as the church in the wake of COVID-19. How then should we live?

In his Presidential address, the new President of Conference the Revd Richard Teal spoke of the way in which the Psalms with all their varying moods and contexts lead us through three phases of life: orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Orientation is when life is simple and good, and it is easy to praise God. Disorientation is where we are now, as a crisis envelops us and we don't know what to do. Reorientation comes after that, when God delivers his people and leads them into a new future. That's our next destination, but we don't know what it looks like, nor how long the journey will take.

Some people in their disorientation long for the prospect of returning to the earlier phase, to 'The good old days' or 'back to normal'. But no crisis leaves us unchanged. Clichéd as it may be, the talk in the media of 'The new normal' is undoubtedly correct. When we get to reorientation, normality will be different in some ways from what we previously knew. While only a minority of people will have caught the novel coronavirus, it will leave none of us unchanged.

So – as I said – how then should we live?

In Joshua chapter three the instruction comes to follow wherever the Levitical priests carry the ark of the covenant. The ark signified to Israel the presence of the Lord among them. The equivalent for us is to look for the presence of God in our current circumstances. Where do we see God at work in our present crisis? We should get involved.

Where is he at work, then?

One example observed by many is that as churches have resorted to online worship, a wide spiritual hunger beyond the church community has become apparent. In the case of the weekly devotional videos that I post to YouTube, I know of people watching who mostly haven't been near church since Sunday School, and some others are watching who have

never been part of the believing community. And although the overall viewing figures fluctuate, these reflections are seen by far more people online than would have heard me in a circuit pulpit.

Friends, we have a mission field being put right in front of our eyes without any effort from ourselves. Surely this is God on the move. We need to follow the ark.

Yes, I know we still have to care for those in our churches with no Internet access, but what we cannot do is still drive our churches based on the preferences of those we already have. That is to take the missional thrust out of the church – something we've been rather too effective at in recent decades.

God is opening up new vistas for his mission. We need to follow his presence and join him there.

But to prepare ourselves for this, there is one other element in those opening verses from Joshua 3. In verse 5 Joshua tells the people,

'Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.'

Consecrate yourselves. Be set apart for the holy purposes of God. Look like you're a Christian!

Having mentioned the new President of Conference, I also want to quote the new Vice-President, Carolyn Lawrence. In her Vice-Presidential address she spoke about The Good, The Mad, and The Ugly in the church. As well as much good in our churches, there is also too much mad and ugly. Is it not time for us to stop tolerating and explaining away much unacceptable behaviour in our churches? The bad tempers, the possessiveness, the racism, and much more. Too many people are outside the church today – or have never joined – because they have been hurt by Christians.

To sum up: we haven't been this way before, but God is leading us somewhere good, so let us follow his presence. And to prepare for this, let us recognise by our lifestyles that God is setting us apart for his holy purposes.

Your friend in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave Faulkner". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Dave Faulkner