

TIME TO GET GOING

SEPTEMBER 7, 2008

September in the year of our Lord 2008! The summer holiday months are over and it is time to begin our usual fall and winter activities together as a community: school classes, clubs reactivated, sport activities starting up, music lessons resumed, and churches back to the normal worship life.

We hear wistful sighs from people and perhaps ourselves that the lazy days of summer are behind us and future activities mean gearing up for action and quickening our pace. Back to normal we say, though never truly sure as to what is normal. Could you define normal in your life?

The question as to what is normal is an intriguing one is it not? Normal is never the same for any two people. Nevertheless, many are happy to go back to routine known as normal and others are not. The one advantage of going back to so called “normal” is that we get into a routine once again and this has some advantages in arranging the use of our time and our priorities.

Our first reading today from the Book of Exodus continues the story of Moses and his leadership to free the Hebrew slaves from their Egyptian masters. You remember last week that Moses was very comfortable in his life outside Egypt where he had married the clansman’s daughter and had settled into a happy routine of life.

As Moses grew comfortable in his life style, his curiosity got the better of him when he saw the burning bush in the distance, a bush burning without appearing to be consumed by the flames. Intrigued, he investigated this phenomenon only to come face to face with the Almighty God, the God of his ancestors Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. God soon prodded him out of his comfort zone and told him of his new role God planned for him. He was to be the leader of the Hebrews in their fight to leave slavery and Egypt. In short, Moses discovered that God had a plan for the rest of his natural life.

In today’s reading, we have Moses setting out the instructions he has received from God which he was to pass on to all the Hebrews. Already, a series of terrible things have fallen on the Egyptians. They were seriously shaken by numerous plagues and natural disasters. However, they were still determined to keep the Hebrew slaves who formed a skilled, cheap labour force. Moses had clearly more than worn out his welcome at the pharaoh’s palace. On a regular basis, he had asked the pharaoh to let his people go free. No way, the pharaoh had always said. It will not happen under my watch.

This is the context in which Moses received instructions to ready the people to leave Egypt quickly perhaps at a moment’s notice. These instructions were given to assist the people to be ready and to prepare for the night of God’s pass over their homes. Today, Jews still celebrate the Feast of the Passover, the day Hebrew’s were spared God’s terrible powers addressed upon the Egyptian people to convince them finally to release the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage.

Ritual and symbolism have always been an integral part of public, community worship. Now the Hebrew people, before they went to bed on the fateful night, were to mark their houses with the blood of a sacrificed lamb, marking the doorways and door frames with the lamb's blood. That night, death came through the area and the eldest male of all persons who had not marked their doors died. Even the young crown prince of Egypt died and mourning and whaling filled the land. Death passed over the Hebrew homes – thus the name of the feast of remembrance known as Passover.

To the early Christian church, this Passover experience was likened to Jesus, through the shedding of his blood, protecting those who followed him in faith. In our Lord's Supper celebrations, we drink the cup, symbolic of the blood Jesus shed for the redemption of each one of us.

The instruction Moses gave to his people was to sacrifice a blemish free lamb and place its blood on their door lintels. Jesus was viewed by the apostles as the perfect, blemish free lamb, that lamb which was sacrificed for the sins of all. Jesus, the perfect lamb, took all our sins upon him in his death and in his triumphant resurrection.

Jesus' apostles knew their Old Testament and its famous stories of brilliant leaders such as Moses who were called by God to lead in highly stressful and eventful times. When they were thinking about Jesus and his work in ministry, they thought back to Moses and the challenges he faced in leading his people to freedom. Even tougher for Moses was the challenge to instill in the Hebrews a clear and right understanding of who God was and is and evermore will be.

Of interest as well in this narrative of the Passover experience, is the instructions for the day to follow this terrible act of death, this act which would finally free the Hebrews from their slave obligations in Egypt. They were all to make ready to leave very quickly in the morning. They were to get bread ready for the morning journey. This bread was to be unleavened to show the haste in which they left in response to what God had done for them that night when they were passed over by the angel of death.

Take everything you need for the journey was the call. Take only what you need and leave behind things which have no value for you as you cross the Nile into the desert. Just go in haste without turning back! Trust in God and you will be safe in the journey to the new land.

This story of the departure from Egypt was important to the Hebrews and it has been told to future generations ever since. It has within it the assertion that the God known to the Hebrews was a strong God, one whose powers were acknowledged even by the might of Egypt. After the death of so many Egyptians including his son, the pharaoh begs Moses to lead his people out of Egypt that the curse might be lifted from the Egyptian nation.

If you had a call to leave quickly, what would you take? We are so burdened, at least some of us, by our possessions and collections of things, that the new journey appears well nigh impossible. Ever felt that way? I have.

And so we have the morning after the night of death. Moses announces the good news that the people are free to go. You can imagine the looks on people's faces. Can it be that we are finally to taste freedom from slavery? What will it feel like, this freedom? We never really expected this to happen in our lifetime! Then excitement soon turns to fear. Panic begins to settle in as people mill around and realize they are finally going. They assemble for the march out of bondage, out of Egypt into a strange new land.

Dare we go? Will the pharaoh really let us go or will he change his mind as we leave and send his army to punish and slaughter us? At least we know what is here in Egypt – food, lodgings and water. What will we find as we enter the hot, dry desert? Is Moses just leading us to an unrealistic ending? How do we get around the river and the Red Sea? Perhaps we are better to stay here where we are, for at least here in Egypt we know what to expect.

Be calm, said Moses, do not panic. Put your trust in God and he will lead you to safety and to freedom in a new land.

Where would you be that morning and what would you be feeling and saying to others? Would you be savouring the adventure or would you be standing back in fear?

God is well aware of our natural human tendency to be afraid and timid before major changes in our lives. Jesus dealt with the same thing with the Apostles and the other followers. We mumble the right words and pray that God might change something within us or our community. Then, when new possibilities stare us in the face, we begin to worry and sometimes fall back into old ways because it feels safer somehow. Stepping out in faith, though what we want to do, is not easy for many of us. Old ways and old ties are hard to break as we venture forth trusting not only God but our own capacity for change.

In Matthew's Gospel today, we read the brief passage from chapter 18. The disciples were working hard at understanding God's plan for them and also for Jesus. Change was in the air. But how far will this change go, for some of its ramifications will not be easy.

Peter, ever the spokesman willing to risk asking questions to Jesus even if it made him feel vulnerable and foolish, was aware that Jesus expected his followers to be different in their behaviour and thinking from most men and women. They had lived beside him, heard him preach and saw the miracles he brought about in the lives of so many people. So Peter came up to Jesus with this simple question: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" To Peter, that sounded like often enough when dealing with a person who kept on causing grief and perhaps havoc.

Jesus provides this short and succinct answer "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." As a kid in Sunday School I remember calculating how many times that was and even then knowing it would never be easy to follow this teaching of Jesus.

Not seven, but seventy times seven. Wow! Does this sound easy to you? When I think of this, I know I will always have to ask God's for his forgiveness and his strengthening spirit for it is impossible for me to achieve even though I may try so hard.

Change – so hard to follow through and yet we know from experience that change can usually teach us so much more about life and ourselves than the contentment of the same routine day after day.

When I speak here of change, image what changes might be facing us. All of us are facing the change of aging as the years roll by. We become aware of things we may not be able to do as well anymore. Relationships change, loved ones die or move away, children grow up and leave home, financial pressures are exacerbated by low interest rates and inflation, community activities we have always enjoyed change and we feel empty.

How we manage change is critical for us all. As we start the busy church year, we can be excited or tired. I would hope we are all anticipating that as Moses found in the least likely place, a burning bush, God is there with us daily challenging and prodding us to be willing to be open to new experiences and the wonder of life and to be excited by what lies ahead for us.

Personally, I am excited by the church year ahead for this parish. I feel privileged to be a part of your journey and to have you share my journey of faith for however long our time together may be. There are so many adventures ahead for us as a parish, as individual churches and as Christian men and women struggling to be faithful to the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Seventy times seven we exclaim in disbelief! Can I honestly say I can be the kind of person God created me to be in all I do? This much I know – alone I can never achieve a life that is even close to the example of Jesus. However, as we work together here, as we share our stories, our dreams, our joys, our sorrows, our excitement and our disappointments, then what God created me to be becomes closer to reality. We are strengthened and embolden by one another and through it all we are blessed.

Remember the Hebrews on the morning of the great day of liberation came. If a vote were taken, they might never have left and would have missed the great adventure with God and missed the joy of the new land of freedom and faith.

Today I pledge all I have to working with each of you as together we seek the ways of God and the richness of life God so freely promised to us at our creation. For it is in our common pledge to one another that we will experience what Jesus taught about the wonder of life and the joys of being a loyal follower of God.

September, here we are! Climb on board, the adventure is about to begin.

Rev. Gary Magarrell