

“BE BOLD!”
Joshua 1:1-9

In just under four weeks' time someone will arrive at the gates of Buckingham Palace and be ushered into the presence of Her Majesty the Queen. After the usual niceties (and you may have seen them in the film *The Queen*), that person will be invited to form the next government. Should it be Gordon Brown, he'll have at least some idea of what's likely to be required of him. Should it be David Cameron or Nick Clegg, they will have what I believe is called “a steep learning curve” in front of them. It will all be new to them and, I would imagine, there will be a good deal of rather awed anxiety mixed in with any emotions of triumph or joy.

We've just read the part of the story of Israel in which Joshua is invited – no, commanded – by God to form the next government, as it were. Moses has died, just outside the land of Canaan from which he has been barred because of his temper tantrum years before in the desert. Moses has been a great leader – the one who will always be remembered for leading the people from their slavery in Egypt, for giving The Law to the people, for meeting with God, for creating the foundations of the tribal nation of Israel. He was leader for forty years and brought the people to the very brink of the new homeland which God had promised them.

Now Joshua is to take over. The wanderings in the desert are over. The nation is a united entity. The promised homeland is literally in sight. Joshua is overjoyed at his promotion, but also apprehensive about how he will fulfil the responsibilities that are now his. The future will be exciting. There are other tribes to conquer. There will be all the arrangements necessary to transform a nomadic people into a settled nation state. There will be judgements to make, worship to arrange, people to manage, an economy to build. It must have been an amazing time for Joshua.

I am pretty sure that none of us here this morning is in the situation Joshua found himself in. And none of us – at present, at any rate – is in the position Messrs Brown, Cameron or Clegg might be in on Friday 7th May. But we all stand on the brink of the future. We all have things that are looming on the horizon which may seem to us just as important, as overwhelming, as awesome as anything Joshua had to face. We have our career paths, our educational choices, our treatment plans, our financial responsibilities, our relationship issues, our family plans, maybe even our calling into some kind of Christian ministry lying ahead of us and although, like Joshua, we are excited by some of the things that might happen, we are also, like Joshua, sacred stiff of what might happen.

So let's have a look at the way in which God inspired Joshua for the task ahead. We worship the same God. We pledge our allegiance to him. We believe in his continuing activity, demonstrated most amazingly in the death and resurrection of Jesus, as we celebrated last weekend. We say and sing that we trust him. So let's see what he might have to say to us as we reflect on this story of Joshua.

God gives Joshua a vision of what is to be done. Joshua is to cross the River Jordan, the symbolic and geographical boundary of God's promised land and then take over all the territory from the Mediterranean Sea to the River Euphrates, from the Sinai Desert to Lebanon. The only problem is that there are already an awful lot of people living there who aren't going to take too kindly to a nation of ex-slaves coming in and taking over. Battles will be fought. There will be casualties. Setbacks will occur.

But, having given Joshua the vision of what will be accomplished, God goes on to assure him that he will be with him, just as he was with his predecessor Moses. Joshua will be invincible. No-one will be able to stand against him as long as he lives. They are good words to hear at this stage of his career, but his faith in them will be sorely tested as he leads his people into battle and faces the unknown might of the various tribes he is to dislodge. And as he moves forward, God gives him advice which is repeated almost like a refrain in this passage. Three times Joshua is told, “*Be strong and courageous.*” And it is actually repeated to him by the people in the section after the one we read this morning. Each time that phrase is

used, though, there's a slightly different emphasis and that's what we're just going to focus in for a few moments now.

1. YOU ARE PART OF GOD'S WILL (v6)

The first time this command appears, Joshua is told that the reason for his boldness is to be that God *will* lead the people into the land, and he will lead them into the land he has already promised their ancestors. Joshua is standing at a particular point in the history of God's people. There are things which have led up to this point and there are things will lead on from it. It's all part of God's will and great things are going to come of it. Joshua is an integral part of what God is doing – and, make no mistake about it, if it's God's will, it will be accomplished. Joshua is privileged to be a part of that. He can see that this is all part of God's unfolding plan.

On the front of this quarter's *Encounter With God*, the Scripture Union Bible reading scheme that some of you use, there's a quotation from Gerard Kelly, a church leader in Amsterdam and a regular Spring Harvest speaker, which says, "*Get a grip on the future without losing your hold on the past.*" In other words, whatever is in store for you is going to be shaped by what has already happened, so don't forget to build on what's gone. Joshua could look to the future with confidence not only because of what God had promised him about that future, but also because he had already experienced the ways in which God kept his promises in the past. God's plan was being worked out and Joshua was pivotal in that – just as were all those who were part of the nation of Israel at that time. What they couldn't know, of course, was that this was part of an even greater plan – a bigger picture, if you like – which would lead to the redemption and liberation of all humankind through the life, death and resurrection of one who would one day be born into their nation.

I suppose that, in some ways, it's like being a church leader. You come to a church which has a tradition, a history. God has already been at work in that place. When I came here, God had been at work for a hundred and eighty years. Great things had happened and were happening here. We could – we can – look back and see just how God has led his people here through thick and thin. We rejoice in the way he kept his promises to William Salt, to Tom Magahy, Donald Davis, Alex Jacob and all the other ministers and people in between. But there's a future to look forward to, more amazing things in store, great plans that God has for us here and we are privileged to be here at this time, a small part in God's unfolding plan for this church, a smaller part in his plan for this city, a very small part in his plans for the world – but part of it all nonetheless.

You are part of God's will, part of his plan. You can look back at what has already happened, at ways in which God has been at work in your situation, at ways in which he has demonstrated his activity, his loving care in your life or in the lives of those around you. He has kept promises. He has enabled things to happen. He has brought you to a point of faith in him. And he has far more in store for you. There are always going to be things that you, and only you, can do – little parts of his great overarching plans for this world that can be furthered by your participation if you're bold enough to allow that to happen. God says to us, as he said to Joshua, "I've got great things in store for you. Have you got the guts to let me do it?" And, in many ways, you'd really need to have the guts to stand up and say no, because God has his will and he will accomplish it. But where do we really find that boldness and courage. Well, let's look at the next bit of the story.

2. GOD'S WILL SHOULD BE PART OF YOU (v,7,8)

The second time God gives this command to be bold to Joshua the word "very" is added. There doesn't seem to be any particular reason for that extra word, but it serves to emphasise once again that this is pretty vital advice. And the way Joshua is to ensure that he remains strong and courageous is to stick to God's will as revealed in the Scriptures. Of course, there wasn't a great deal of Scripture to go on at that

point in the history of God's people – it consisted mainly, pretty well exclusively of the *Torah*, the Law of Moses. But that was where all the wisdom and instruction of God was encapsulated for his people.

Joshua was to ensure that he stuck to the will of God as revealed in the *Torah*, and he was to keep it in mind at all times. Or rather, he was to keep it in his mouth at all times. God says that he should not let it “depart from his mouth”, which seems a rather strange little idiom until you realise that until relatively recently – within the last few centuries – reading was always done aloud. In fact, the Hebrew word translated here as “meditate” actually means “mutter”. Joshua and his contemporaries would be constantly reciting bits of Scripture, it was part of the fabric of their lives, part of the habitual activity of their very bodies.

Do you want to know how to remain bold and courageous for God? Take the Scriptures into every part of your being. Read the Bible – read it regularly and systematically. I've already mentioned Scripture Union's Bible reading scheme, but there are plenty of others, too, if you feel you need that. Or read through the Bible yourself. The MOB use a Bible called the *Cover To Cover Bible*, which has the entire Bible arranged for daily reading. Make yourself time each day to read a section from the Bible – maybe just a chapter, which would take between five and fifteen minutes – and then think about it, reflect on what it might be saying to you, commit part of it to memory so that you can “mutter it” through the day – as we did with Anne earlier on.

When I was at school and university, I used to learn bits of poetry and sections of plays off by heart. It was a great help in writing essays and passing exams. There are still odd bits of things I can dredge up from the past – and many of you, I'm sure, could do the same with song lyrics. I was in the vestry over at Tamworth Baptist Church a couple of weeks ago and someone came in with the radio mic and said, “There you are. Programmed to receive.” And, I kid you not, three of us said in unison, “You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.” The we looked at each other and said, again in glorious, unrehearsed unison, “The Eagles. *Hotel California*.”

But knowing that kind of stuff off by heart will never change your life. Knowing the Bible will. Especially if you take seriously the second part of what God says: “*Be careful to do everything written in it.*” Know it – and do it. Put it into practice. Plenty of people know the Bible. Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Philip Pullman and all the other trendy atheists know their Bibles. They can quote stuff from it probably better than some Christians can. But they don't do it. They don't take it seriously. Do you? Get stuck into it and learn it, practice it, weave it into every fibre of your being so that your daily behaviour is entirely influenced by it. “*Then you will be prosperous and successful,*” says God to Joshua.

3. GOD WILL NEVER PART FROM YOU (v9)

The third time God tells Joshua to be bold, there's another slight twist to it. I have said several times that this was God's advice to Joshua. But I've also said – and here it's made explicit – that this is a command! “*Haven't I commanded you?*” asks God. This isn't a kind of “Play up and play the game!” kind of exhortation. This is the kind of command you'd get from Sir Alex Ferguson when you're three-nil down at half time – no doubts at all about what he's expecting you to do. (Please don't infer from that that I have any intention at all of suggesting Sir Alex is anything like God!) Get out there and get stuck in!

And with the positive “*Be strong and courageous*” comes the negative “*Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged.*” Fine words. But can you actually command someone not to be scared or downhearted? I don't think you can – not even God can. Or, at least, he can command, but it's humanly very difficult to obey. Of course there were things which must have scared Joshua – standing across the battlefield from a bunch of Canaanites who weren't about to give up their land without a very fierce fight, walking round

Jericho with no weapons other than a bunch of chanting priests and a few trumpeters. Sometimes it must have seemed to Joshua utter folly to do the things which God was asking of him.

But once again, God adds something to back up his command, a word of encouragement, a word to make Joshua courageous – “*the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*” Just as he was with Moses, just as he was with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, just as he helped them through all kinds of problems and difficulties, he will be with Joshua. The situation is new and different, but the God is the same. Just stick in there. The Old Testament scholar John Gray writes of this passage, “*God effects the fulfilment of his promise; man’s part is to hold fast to his faith.*” Joshua needed to believe that God would be with him. And he was able to do that on the evidence that he had always helped him – and Moses, and all the others – in the past. God was not going to part company with him now.

Nor will he with you. Remember Jesus’ last words to his followers as he prepared to leave them at the end of Matthew’s gospel. The people who were actually with him at that point had probably assumed on more than one occasion that he had left them. He’d been executed on the cross and clearly had died. His talk of the Kingdom seemed to have been just that – talk. His body had disappeared from the tomb where they’d taken care to put it. He had left them, so it seemed. But then he turned up and he’d been there all along. He had never really left them at all. So when he said to them, as he commissioned them for the work he had for them to do – continuing and expanding his mission – “*Surely I am with you always*”, his followers then and now could believe him. We can believe him. You can believe him.

Jesus is alive! He is with us. He will never leave us and through him, through the presence of his Holy Spirit, we can know that God will be with us wherever we go. And that is why we can be strong and courageous. That’s why we can be bold in our worship, work and witness. That’s why we can sing “*I am not afraid. I am not dismayed.*” That’s why we can claim to walk in faith – because we are part of God’s will and his will is part of us – and can walk in victory – because Jesus has overcome everything that could possibly harm us, including death and the forces of evil themselves. The problems of life will not be removed from us any more than God removed the Jebusites and Hittites and all the other –ites from Joshua’s path. But just as God was with Joshua in his struggles against his enemies, so he has promised to be with us as we grapple with the situations and circumstances that seem to threaten us. That’s why he commands us to be strong and courageous. May he also give us the faith to demonstrate that.

Discussion notes on next page

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Questions for discussion

1. Have you had times when you have needed to be strong and courageous? Have you been aware of God's help at such times?
2. How can looking to the past help you cope with the future?
3. What help is the Bible when we need to be strong and courageous? Are there particular texts or passages which you have found especially helpful?
4. Jesus said "I am with you always" as he left his disciples and returned to heaven. What did he mean by those words? How have you found them to be true?

5. The song *Be bold, be strong* includes the words "*I'm walking in faith and victory*". What do you understand by that?