

“LITTLE BY LITTLE”
Exodus 23:20-33

This is the first time we've been together as a congregation in this new year. In a few minutes we'll say together a prayer that we normally use at this time of year, looking out over the next twelve months with a vision of where we want to be going, but a fair bit of uncertainty about how we'll get there. We want to continue to be a church at the heart of the city with Christ at the heart of the church. We want to worship God and serve this community in any way in which God calls us to, but we're not really sure how things are going to work out – just as we all, no doubt, feel a sense of uncertainty about what's going to happen in our own personal situations.

Of course, the first Sunday in the new year is a fairly arbitrary time to stop and think about where we've come from and where we're going. We could just as easily do this on the second Sunday in May or the third Sunday in November, but there's something about this time, when the year turns and the days start to lengthen again, when the very first signs of new life begin to appear. So let's ponder for a few moments this morning what God might have to say to us from the words we've just read at this point in our shared life.

The reason we read that passage from *Exodus* this morning is that it relates to a new start for God's people Israel. They were on their way out of the years of forced labour, poverty and oppression in Egypt, looking forward to a settled and free existence in the land that God had promised them. It was an exciting time, an anxious time, a significant time for them. At the point we picked up their story, Moses their leader is listening to God's plans for them as a people. He has given them the basic laws by which they are to live – the “Ten Commandments” – and started to explain how they are to relate to one another and to him.

And then he tells Moses that he will be with them as they make this new start together. He promises angelic protection as they listen carefully to his words – *“If you listen carefully ... and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you”* (v22). And then God tells Moses that he has a clear plan for them. The land they are to occupy will be cleared for them. That's the first thing to remember about God and his dealings with us as we step out into the unknown of another year: **GOD HAS A PLAN.**

Throughout the Bible – throughout the history of the people of Israel, throughout the history of the Church – God always has a plan. He knows where he wants his people to go, what he wants them to do, what the end result will be. Sometimes he makes that very clear and he is able to give his followers a fairly good idea of what is going to happen. Think of how detailed his plans were to Joshua when he captured Jericho, or to Gideon as he defeated the Midianites. But more often than not, God tells his people that he is going to do something, but gives very little clue as to how he is going to do it. His covenant with Abraham was very clear about the eventual blessings that would come to Abraham's descendants, but there wasn't a lot of detail about how on earth it was going to happen. In fact, to Abraham and Sara it seemed as if it was actually impossible to fulfil – and a bit more detail would have solved an awful lot of debate, not only amongst theologians, but also between Jews, Christians and Muslims!

Think too about God's plan for salvation. Throughout the Old Testament and through the life and teaching of Jesus himself, it was obvious that God had a plan, but the details were pretty sketchy until the very last minute – indeed, it didn't really become completely clear until after Jesus had died and been brought back to life. When God called Peter and Paul and the other apostles, he left them in no doubt that they were to be used by him to bring others to know Jesus – there was clearly a plan – but the details of that plan emerged only gradually as they responded with faith and obedience to that call.

And there's the key, I believe: faith and obedience. That's what God tells Moses here – *“listen carefully”* and *“do all that I say”* – and then the plan will unfold, then God will *“guard [them] along the way and*

bring [them] to the place I have prepared”. Our challenge, as this new year begins, is to believe that God does have a plan for us, there is a purpose to our being together at this time (2013) and in this place (the centre of Lichfield) and, although we have a vague notion that it will involve reaching out to this community with the love of Jesus and giving people glimpses of his Kingdom, the details of that will gradually become apparent as we obey his word to us.

And a lot of that will be dependent on the second principle we can spot in this story – that **GOD HAS HIS TIMING**. No doubt these people of Israel, standing really on the brink of their new territory, would have loved to be able to rush in and occupy it all. If only their God – the God who had so miraculously liberated them from Egypt, the God who was watching over them, the God who had shown his wisdom and his might and his astonishing power in all kinds of amazing ways – if only he could clear the land and let them pour in and settle down immediately. But that’s not how God works, on the whole. What struck me forcibly about this passage this morning – and why I feel it right to reflect on it together – is a phrase in v30. God tells them his plan will become apparent, “*Little by little*”.

Oh, how frustrating that must have been over the next forty years! And how frustrating we find it when we discover that’s the way God works – “*little by little*”. Once again, there are occasions when God shows he is capable of acting with great alacrity and immediacy. And we all believe that can happen: God is capable of doing some astounding miracles that sort stuff out immediately. But, by and large, he seems to work a lot more slowly. Centuries passed between God’s initial promises about salvation for his creation, about liberation from evil for the human race, and the climax of that plan on the cross at Golgotha. It might have been only four days, but they must have seemed like centuries to Mary and Martha when Jesus took his time coming to Bethany after hearing that Lazarus was ill. You can read through the book of *Acts* in an evening and discover the exciting story of the Gospel being preached around the Mediterranean, but that story took decades to unfold. We think of the crowds who responded to Paul’s preaching, but he spent two years in Ephesus, for example, giving daily sermons in the lecture hall. We read of revivals and movements throughout Church History, but they didn’t happen overnight – they took years of faithful prayer and holy living on the part of a few of God’s people.

God has given us a vision of what he wants us to do here in Lichfield. We know he has a plan. He has confirmed his promises to us in all kinds of ways. Why can’t we just turn up here one Sunday morning and find the place packed out with people desperate to give their lives to Christ? Why can’t we accomplish all that God wants us to before the end of the month and with a good deal less hassle and effort? Why won’t God just get on and do it? Because he accomplishes his plans “*little by little*”, he takes his time, he doesn’t rush. And don’t we find it difficult! These are the words of a prayer we used in one of our 9 o’clock services during Advent, taken from a collection of reflections published by the URC:

It’s alright for you, Lord God!

Your time is endless for making promises, and you have all eternity to fulfil them!

But see how impatient we are – see how we humans want everything now!

Is that why you make us wait for the right time and place?

Are you teaching us patience still?

Lord God, we confess that we want things to happen yesterday.

We want peace and justice today and not tomorrow.

We want equality and freedom in the present and not as a promise for the future.

*We want to see your Kingdom come in **our** time.*

*Waiting for **your** time makes us doubt.*

And I suppose that sums it all up, really – God looks at things from an entirely different temporal perspective. He sees the broad sweep of history and knows what the perils and pitfalls would be if he just allowed everything to happen at once. We need patience and trust, believing that God knows best. Which is what Moses and the people of Israel needed to know.

And they needed to be reassured about the third principle from this passage – that **GOD HAS HIS REASONS**. You see, God actually tells them here that he will accomplish his plan “*little by little*” because if he doesn’t, things will go wrong. Look at v29: “*I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you*”. He would allow them to take over the land gradually so that they could cope with the potential problems of settling an untended and uninhabited country. The trouble is, God isn’t always quite so forthcoming about his reasons. He doesn’t always let us know why stuff isn’t happening as fast as we’d like. Samuel must have been very frustrated about the way in which David’s succession to the throne of Israel seem to be drawn out. Paul was clearly left wondering why it was taking so long for him to get the gospel out to the peoples of Asia Minor and Southern Europe – why did he have to put up with shipwrecks and riots and delays caused by bureaucrats and officials? But God had his reasons, which really only became apparent after Paul’s death.

It all comes back down to what we said earlier on. We believe God has his plans for us – as a church, as individuals, as families – and we believe, deep down that he will accomplish them. But we need trust and obedience if we are to be able to follow him and continue working for him. It’s all summed up in the words of a song by John Sammis:

WHEN WE WALK WITH THE LORD

*In the light of His word,
What a glory He sheds on our way!
While we do His good will,
He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey!*

*Trust and obey!
For there’s no other way
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey.*

(You can find the whole song at 760 in *Mission Praise*.)

You see, God is quite capable of getting everything done miraculously and immediately – and sometimes, just sometimes, he does. But usually, it seems, he tends to work within our human time frames. He wants stuff done sensibly and correctly. All of us, I think, believe deep down that he has got it all planned out, but we’d like to see things done a bit quicker just to justify that belief. It was another forty years after the episode we’ve read about this morning before the people of Israel got to enter their new territory – and all kinds of things happened along the way. But God was with them as he had promised. And his plans came to fruition as he had promised.

As we set out on a new year, we continue to believe (I hope) that God has a plan for us here. And he has his own timing for that, a timing based very clearly on his reasons. He knows what lies in store for us far, far better than we do. So let us believe in his promises, trust his timings and obey his words to us in 2013. And may we know the help of his Holy Spirit as we do so, because in all of it we long to see Jesus glorified and his influence spread through this community. (Which is why we’re now going to sing, “*We want to see Jesus lifted high*”.)

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This passage relates to a new start for God's people Israel. They were on their way out of the years of forced labour, poverty and oppression in Egypt, looking forward to a settled and free existence in the land that God had promised them. It was an exciting time, an anxious time, a significant time for them. God tells Moses that he will be with them as they make this new start together. He promises angelic protection as they listen carefully to his words – *"If you listen carefully ... and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you"* (v22). And then God tells Moses that he has a clear plan for them.

1. GOD HAS A PLAN

God always has a plan. Sometimes he makes that very clear and he is able to give his followers a fairly good idea of what is going to happen. (Think about Joshua when he captured Jericho, or Gideon as he defeated the Midianites.) But more often than not, God tells his people that he is going to do something, but gives very little clue as to how he is going to do it.

The key is faith and obedience. That's what God tells Moses here – *"listen carefully"* and *"do all that I say"* – and then the plan will unfold, then God will *"guard [them] along the way and bring [them] to the place I have prepared"*. Our challenge, as this new year begins, is to believe that God does have a plan for us, there is a purpose to our being together at this time.

2. GOD HAS HIS TIMING

No doubt these people of Israel, standing really on the brink of their new territory, would have loved to be able to rush in and occupy it all. If only their God could clear the land and let them pour in and settle down immediately. But that's not how God works, on the whole. God tells them his plan will become apparent, *"Little by little"*. There are occasions when God shows he is capable of acting with great alacrity and immediacy. God can do astounding miracles that sort stuff out immediately. But, by and large, he seems to work a lot more slowly.

God has given us a vision of what he wants us to do here in Lichfield. We know he has a plan. He has confirmed his promises to us in all kinds of ways. But he accomplishes his plans *"little by little"*; he takes his time, he doesn't rush, because he looks at things from an entirely different temporal perspective. He sees the broad sweep of history and knows what the perils and pitfalls would be if he just allowed everything to happen at once. We need patience and trust, believing that God knows best.

3. GOD HAS HIS REASONS

God tells Moses that he will accomplish his plan *"little by little"* because if he doesn't, things will go wrong. Look at v29. He would allow them to take over the land gradually so that they could cope with the potential problems of settling an untended and uninhabited country. The trouble is, God doesn't always let us know why stuff isn't happening as fast as we'd like.

We believe God has his plans for us – as a church, as individuals, as families – and we believe, deep down that he will accomplish them. But we need trust and obedience if we are to be able to follow him and continue working for him.

Questions for discussion

Do you believe God has a plan for you, for the church? Are you clear about where he might be leading?

Can you give any examples of how God's plans have worked out in your life up until now?

Why do you think we become impatient with God sometimes? What can we do to deal with that?

What are the advantages of things been done (or disclosed) *"little by little"*?

How can we help each other to *"trust and obey"*?