

“EBENEZER”
1 Samuel 7:2-17

As we have seen over the past year, music in church can excite some strong emotions. Hymns and songs are pretty well always guaranteed to please some people and annoy (or worse) others. There are those people who like the new songs and for whom every service has to contain mainly songs written since 2010. And there are other people who don't think anything written since 1850 is worth the effort of joining in. And there are all kinds of reasons for that.

It may be to do with the music, which is a fairly important component of any song – style, arrangement, performance and so on. For other people it's the theology in the hymn – it's too simplistic, too liberal, too evangelical, there isn't any. Some compilers of hymnbooks, for example, will not include any of Stuart Townend's wonderful hymns because they disagree with his theology of the atonement and he (quite understandably) refuses to allow them permission to change his lyrics. Yet others don't like the language that is used – it's too archaic and incomprehensible to today's generation brought up on soundbites and text abbreviations: words like “*ineffable*” and “*redemption*”, phrases like “*washed in the blood*” and “*be all else but naught to me save that thou art*”. Or it's too modern and slangy – particularly in children's songs which used words like “*wanna*”, “*gonna*” and “*wicked*” with the meaning of “good”. And, of course, there's the vexed question of sexist language and the need to be politically correct, especially in some of the old Victorian hymns which were about mission to “*darkest Africa*” and the like. Some editors actually do try to upgrade the words and make them more accessible, usually at the expense of the poetry or the majesty of the original words – Jubilate Hymns are good (or bad) ones for that.

But you have to admit, there are some hymns and songs which really do grate on the ear today. Some of Sankey's Victorian sentimental schmaltz sounds really odd to 21st century ears. There are those that struggle with rhymes and rhythm, or use quite inappropriate language – I remember seeing a communion hymn once which began “*Let's masticate Jesus*” in the sense of chewing on him! And there are other where the words have simply changed their meaning over time – “*wicked*” is one such example and Andrew told us a bit about “*God rest ye merry, gentlemen*” at the carol service, where “*rest*” means “keep” and “*merry*” can mean “mighty”.

But often there's a reliance on a shared knowledge of particular ideas and allusions which are no longer current. Many, many hymns and songs quite naturally contain biblical images and references to stories and concepts that are unique to the Bible, but have absolutely no currency today in a culture that has no biblical education and no background knowledge to rely upon. I can remember a couple of hymns from my youth that I didn't really understand even then – “*There is balm in Gilead*” and “*Sweet Beulah land*”.

What are they all about? And what on earth do we make of the line in the hymn we're going to sing in a bit which says, "*Here I raise mine Ebenezer*"? In most versions of the hymn that you'll find these days, that line has been changed completely. But it might start to make sense if you were listening carefully to the reading we heard just now. And in many ways it's a good concept to think about today as the year turns and we have a kind of "Ebenezer" moment.

The story takes place at a time in Israel's history when they were settled in their new land, having left Egypt and been formed as a nation, but before they had a king. The land was ruled by the Judges, men and women of God who listened for God's voice and tried to help the people follow what he was saying. The last of those Judges was Samuel, their leader at the time of this story. Although the people of Israel were settled and had populated and cultivated the land, they were still subject to attacks by surrounding tribes and nations, some of whom, quite understandably, wanted their land back. The Old Enemy was the Philistine nation and they were constantly marauding around the western edges of Israel's territory. Here they have got wind of the fact that all the Israelites are getting together for a big worship event at Mizpah and they think it would be a good and very convenient time to attack them.

Part of the prayer of the Israelites that day is that the Philistines would stop attacking them and Samuel offers that prayer, along with the sacrifices of the people, to God. As the Philistines prepare to attack, a huge thunderstorm throws the attackers into panic and disarray and the Israelites easily defeat them. They believe that God has helped them in their attempt to overcome their enemies and Samuel decides to commemorate this escape from the invasion.

He does it by setting up a memorial stone. In the ancient world – and, indeed, in the modern world – events such as these are commemorated by putting up a memorial stone. Look at the Cenotaph in London, the village war memorials in practically every community in Britain, the National Memorial Arboretum and the like in our own culture. Samuel's stone would not have been dressed or carved as ours might be, but a great big rock standing up in the landscape would have been something fairly obvious and people, used to a tradition where history was communicated orally rather than by the written word, would have asked why it was there. And in this case they would have received the answer that this was Samuel's "Ebenezer", which means in Hebrew "*Stone of Help*". Samuel had put it up to remind everyone that "*Thus far has the LORD helped us*". In other words, this stone was there to let people know that God had been looking after his people up until that point – and, presumably, would go on looking after them. As we said earlier, it's the kind of thing we're doing – without the stone, of course – this morning, on the threshold of a new year. So what's our Ebenezer moment got in common with Samuel's big rock?

1. A RECOGNITION OF PAST HELP

This stone is there to remind anyone who sees it that God has been looking after his people. The religion and culture of the Jewish people seems to be built on this foundation of remembering what God has done. Their festivals, their worship, their poetry, their story-telling, their whole shared experience seems to have at the heart of it remembering what God has done. And this stone fits in with that. So far God has been helping them. Up to this point in time it's obvious that God has been at work. This isn't just about skirmishes with the Philistines – or any other tribe, for that matter. This is about noticing that God's hand has been on them throughout their history. "*Thus far*", God has been with them, helping, supporting, rescuing, redeeming, providing for them.

And the New Year is a good time, as we've already demonstrated, to look back at what God has been doing, to see that his hand has been on our lives – personally and collectively. We have thanked God this morning for the ways in which he has been at work over the past twelve months. But we also, I hope, set that in the context of his continuing love for and care over us. This is an Ebenezer moment because we can all say, for one reason or another, "*Thus far has the LORD helped us*".

2. A SIGN OF PRESENT THANKSGIVING

Not only could the people of Israel look back at what God had done for them, but they could be grateful for what they were enjoying at that moment. The National Memorial Arboretum not only gives us an opportunity to remember those who have died in the past, but also helps us to be thankful for the measure of peace we currently enjoy in the present. Samuel and the Israelites were grateful for the cessation of hostilities, the restoration of their lands and the relations they now enjoyed with the tribes around them (v14). God's goodness was an ongoing reality, not a fading memory. Indeed, in all the acts of remembrance that were part of their culture, there was the recognition that God's grace and favour was ongoing.

So too, at our New Year Ebenezer moment we can look back at 2014 and give thanks for what God has done, but we do that in the context of worshipping a God who continues to help us and provide for us. The songs we have sung, the prayers we have prayed, the thoughts that have been running through our minds – they are all to do with the ongoing goodness of our God, the God who has saved us and who is

still saving us; the God who has provided for us and is still providing for us, the God who has loved us and is still loving us. And that leads us neatly into our final point.

3. A WITNESS TO FAITH FOR THE FUTURE

When Samuel said, “*Thus far has the LORD helped us*”, he wasn’t implying that they were now on their own, as it were, that God had helped them this far and was now going to leave them to it. The very idea of putting up this stone was that there would be people in future generations who would come and ask what it was all about and, in some way, share the experience of those who had put it up. This stone was an implicit expression of confidence in the future. God was going to go on helping them. They trusted him to go on loving them, providing for them, protecting them.

As, I hope, do we today. God has helped us over this past year. He has been with us back into the past beyond 2014. And we believe he will go on being with us into 2015 and well beyond. In fact, our trust is in him for eternity. If we needed any further reminder of that – indeed, of all that we have talked about this morning – then we have the symbol on the wall behind me to reinforce that Ebenezer feeling. The cross speaks even more eloquently than Samuel’s stone of God’s love for us and of his desire to continue helping, blessing and leading us.

So, as we sing in a few moments,

*Here I raise mine Ebenezer;
Hither, by thy help, I’m come;
And I hope, by thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.*

we can do so with a bit more understanding of what it is we’re on about. Of course, you may have difficulty if you try and talk to your friends about Ebenezer tomorrow morning – but, just like Samuel’s great big rock, it will no doubt provoke some questions and give you an opportunity to say something about God’s help in your life. Whether you use it as a springboard for witness or not, you can still be thankful at the beginning of this New Year for all that God has done so far in your life and for all that he’s doing at the moment. And you can once again commit yourself to him in faith for the year ahead.

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Questions for discussion

1. Why is New Year an Ebenezer moment?
2. Share some of the things you have to be thankful for from 2014.

3. In what ways does the cross act for us as an Ebenezer memorial? How can we make that more obvious in our daily lives?
4. Share some of your hopes and dreams for the coming year. If you have any concerns and fears within the group, take some time to pray for one another.