

# Deuteronomy 31.7-8

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## *Following God Together*

Amington St Editha

Sunday 24 July 2016

### **On the cusp**

This is at the same time one of the easiest and most difficult sermons I have ever had to prepare. It has been bubbling away in me ever since I was appointed – but they are often the hardest to get down on paper, and to keep to a reasonable length! There are so many things I could or would like to say.

The other day I was sitting in my new study reading a passage from Deuteronomy, and I realised that it was the passage I needed to speak on this morning. It's only short, so let me read it to you again, in full. So you can follow along, please open your Bibles to Deuteronomy 31, beginning at verse 7:

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, 'Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance.

The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.'

*Deuteronomy 31.7-8 (NIV)*

I read those words, and I knew I had to speak on them. I hope most of you won't – but if you do drift off or your mind wanders in the next few minutes, you could do much worse than reading those words to yourself, slowly, letting them sink into your heart and mind.

*As an aside – I don't know if you are used to following a sermon with a Bible open in front of you, but I will be encouraging you to do that. Apart from the importance of reading the words of Scripture, it means you can check up on what I say to make sure I'm not making it up!*

In Deuteronomy 31, we are almost at the end of Moses' life. He had led the people of Israel through the wilderness for 40 years, and now, here they all stood, on the cusp of the new things God had in store for them. They had been waiting for 40 years for the promise of the new land to be fulfilled – and now it was time.

I imagine some were excited, itching and ready to go. I imagine some were nervous, wanting the new life waiting for them, but anxious because they didn't know what it would look like. And some were probably downright terrified – after all, they were about to go to war.

I also imagine that many of us here today feel similar emotions to the people of Israel 3,500 years ago. We too are on the cusp of new things. We too have been waiting – not quite 40 years, but for some of us it feels like that! And let me tell you, over the past five months since I was appointed as your new vicar, I have been swinging in equal measures between being excited, anxious and downright terrified.

So here we are: on the cusp.

## **In the presence of all Israel (7)**

Now, Moses was forbidden from setting foot in the Promised Land. He had broken faith with God when the people of Israel grumbled – so although God let him see the whole extent of the land, he was not allowed to set foot in it. The one to take the people of Israel into the Promised Land was not Moses. God was calling Joshua to do that.

So, look at v7 with me: **Moses summoned Joshua ... in the presence of all Israel** (7). Moses knew that he needed to have a very public ceremony, handing over leadership to Joshua, and giving him his charge in front of the people he was about to lead. It seems mad, really – God changing the leader of his people at this critical time. Surely this was when they needed Moses the most? But God knew what he was doing: Moses had done his part: now it was time for him to hand over the reins.

Now, I'm absolutely *not* saying that you've been in the wilderness, and here I am to lead you into the Promised Land! Please don't hear my say that! A lot of good and faithful work has been done here over many years, by many people, and I want to honour that.

The application of this passage for us today is not about the wilderness and the Promised Land, but simply that we, like the people of Israel back then, stand on the cusp of something new.

When Moses handed over the reins to Joshua, he did so **in the presence of all Israel** (7) to reassure them that Joshua was called, chosen, trained and equipped to take over as the leader. Bishop David shared the cure of souls in this parish with me on Tuesday, reassuring you that the wider church believes I have been called, chosen and trained for this ministry.

And, we prayed for the gift of the Spirit to equip me to discharge the duties of that ministry faithfully. I suspect that will be one of my most frequent and fervent prayers as I live and work here.

## **‘You must go with this people’ (7)**

Now, hopefully we are not about to go to war, as Joshua did when he took over! But – if not to war – where is God leading us?

The short answer is: I don’t know – yet.

I do not stand before you with any preconceived ideas of what I’d like to do here.

I do not stand before you with a list of things I want to change, old things I want to cancel and new things I want to start.

I don’t have any of that.

I’m sure you’ve all heard the phrase ‘hit the ground running’? That is my natural way of being. In the early days of my curacy someone described me as a whirlwind – in a (mostly) positive sense: full of fresh energy and blowing out old cobwebs. I like to hit the ground running.

I could have spent the last five months coming up with a grand plan for St Editha's, so I could hit the ground running.

But a year ago I read a book by Stephen Cottrell (Bishop of Chelmsford), called *Hit the Ground Kneeling*.

In it, he says this:

When someone hits the ground running, there is all the superficial attraction of movement and progress. But there is no guarantee that they are going in the right direction. ...

The really wise leader will at this point allow herself to be led: by instinct; by collaboration; by listening to the wisdom and experience of others; and by a painstaking discernment of the choices that lie ahead.

*Stephen Cottrell, Hit the Ground Kneeling, 11-12.*

The key words there are about discernment, listening to others, and collaboration. Look down at v7 with me again. Moses said to Joshua, **in the presence of all Israel:**

'Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them.'

*Deuteronomy 31.7 (NIV)*

The key phrase in there for us is: **you must go *with* this people.** And the key word in that key phrase is: **with.** It's no good me coming here and making all sorts of decisions about what we are doing and where we are going, because I don't know you, you don't know me, and I don't really know how you've got to this point.

We can't hope to go anywhere **with** each other, until first we spend time getting to know each other, praying with each other, listening to each other.

This is so important: Moses didn't tell Joshua 'go *before* this people into the land', as if Joshua was to charge ahead yelling, 'Follow me!' That is not what leading God's people is like. No: Moses told Joshua (7), '**Go *with* this people into the land.**'

So I promise you this morning, I'm not going to go charging off on my own. Over the summer and in the run-up to Christmas, I'm going to hit the ground *kneeling*. My number one priority is going to be to pray – on my own, with you on Sundays and at prayer meetings, and with you when I visit you.

Instead of hitting the ground running by taking over all the various different things that Mike used to do, or that *could* be done, I'm going to hit the ground *kneeling*, listening to God and to you.

That is my second promise to you this morning: I'm going to visit *all* of you, to chat, listen and pray with you. We will get to know each other, and gradually, as we pray and as we listen to one another and to God, we will *together* start to discern the vision, the direction in which God is calling us, *together*.

## **‘The LORD himself goes before you’ (8)**

I hope that sounds ok to you. Please pray for the PCC on Thursday evening as we meet for the first time, to discuss the shape of what I'll be doing for the rest of this year.

And if you are feeling anxious about what might happen now you have a new vicar – look down at v8 with me.

[Moses said,] ‘The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.’

*Deuteronomy 31.8 (NIV)*

Friends, God is with us. He is with us now, he **goes before** us, and he **will be with** us as we journey together. He **will never leave** us; he will never **forsake** us. And so, if we keep our focus on him, we will learn **not to be afraid**, and **not to be discouraged** (8).



Although it may feel like it, we aren't heading into the unknown, but towards God, whom we know in and through Jesus. We are not about to embark on some giant leap into the dark, but like a child being encouraged to take their first steps, we are walking, running, falling into the arms of God. *Repeat* I don't know about you, but thinking about it that way makes it sound a lot less scary!

My vision for ministry is to **encourage** and **inspire** us to be **faithful** and **fruitful** as we **follow** God together. We aren't heading into the unknown, but towards our loving heavenly Father, together.

## Joan Temple

I am going to close with a story and a prayer. About a year ago I visited a lady called Joan. She is a wonderful, faithful Christian, and we talked about all sorts of things, particularly about what sort of place I might like to be vicar of when my curacy ended.

As we were talking, I realised that if I were to start applying for jobs after Christmas, those churches were most likely in their interregnum already – so Joan suggested that I write a prayer for that church and pray for them daily.

So I did. I wrote a prayer, and prayed it every day until I was appointed, when I was able to change it and pray for you by name.

The day I went to see Joan was 15 September 2015 – three days after Mike was inducted into his new parish. So, I have been praying for you since then, for almost all of the interregnum – though I only realised who I was praying for five months ago!

This is the prayer that I was praying for you all that time:

Bless the place and church to which you will send us, Lord.

May they both know and be filled with your love,

that they might trust in you;

and listen for your voice,

that they might follow where you lead.

Give them strength and patience during the interregnum.

Inspire all those who lead,

and by your Spirit enable the whole church

to serve you faithfully.

Guard them with your peace and stillness,

and may your blessing be always upon them.

I will continue praying for you all – please keep praying for me, that together we will be **faithful** and **fruitful** as we **follow** God in this place. And let's see where God is leading us, together!