

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

17.8.14

The Journey – Joss Bray

Last time we looked at who we lived for and what it would look like to live our lives for God.

There were three themes –

The first was focus. We would focus our thoughts much more on God rather than ourselves. We would fix our eyes on Jesus, not on the things around us, or the problems we face.

The second was authority. We would recognise that God had the authority over our lives and that would guide the decisions we made. What we did and what we didn't do would be governed by what would please the king – or not.

The third was security. If our security is in God, then we don't need to worry about what may or may not happen. We can know that we are held in his hands and our destiny is certain and unshakeable.

This week we are going to think about:

The journey

During the last few weeks the world has been remembering the First World War in particular. We had the unveiling of a new memorial in the village. There was a service in the church and then around the memorial.

The hymns we sang were actually quite moving, with some very good words. One that stood out for me was this one:

*O God our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home*

Sometimes we can sing hymns and songs and be so familiar with the words that we don't stop to think about them. That applies to old ones and new ones.

So I thought we could have a look at how it applied to our lives. It describes the journey we are all on. Sometimes we can be so preoccupied with what is going on now and not remember to look at the bigger picture. Our lives are journeys – that is for all of us – whether we are young or old.

There may be many years behind us or only a few – but we are all on a journey.

O God our help in ages past

Many of us can look back and describe how God has been with us and helped us at various points in our lives. These are only the times when we are aware of him. He is always there and always working in ways we do not realise. He chose us and he has been working in our lives to help us to get to know him. We can look back and see how God has been faithful to us in knocking on the door of our lives even though we were not aware of him.

We can think of circumstances where there is no doubt that God has guided and helped us and at just the right time, he has provided all we needed. This can be in many ways and we will all have different stories to tell.

Our hope for years to come

We may have many years left on this earth or not many – who can tell? We all know of friends and loved ones who have died – even very recently and sometimes too young as we see it. However many more years God gives us here, our hope in him is firm. On our journey we have seen his faithfulness in our lives and in others lives. His promise is to neither leave nor forsake us. Our hope is not a vague woolly "well we hope things will be alright" kind of hope. Our hope is built on solid ground – an expectation. The sort of hope that is described like this by Paul in Ephesians:

EPH 1:18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

What God has for us sounds good and it's a certainty!

Our shelter from the stormy blast

I wonder how many times we have been sheltered but we don't even realise it. And there are times when we can testify to being protected and provided for when all seemed bleak - when the icy blasts of life come and all we can do is shelter in God. The "stormy blast" can be relationship breakdowns, financial problems, bereavement, housing issues, addiction, depression and anxiety, physical illness – and all sorts of other troubles that happen. We have noted before that God does not promise that if we trust in Him then these things will not happen. Note Psalm 23:

PS 23:4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me;

Certainly for Jesus and the disciples and the early church, there were no end of stormy blasts – but that was part of the journey. God used the things that were meant for evil for good instead. People grew in faith, many got saved and the church spread and grew all over the world. Paul was shipwrecked several times in literal "stormy blasts" – but he never questioned God as to whether God had got it wrong! Our response to stormy blasts should be to know where the best shelter is. And that is in God.

And our eternal home

However long we have on this earth, we know that our home lies elsewhere if we have faith in Jesus. We know that our citizenship is in a different place. We belong there – in the kingdom of God and the heavenly city. We have a home to look forward to that will knock the spots off anything we have here – or that anyone else has either. We can't begin to imagine what it will be like living forever with God in a place where there is no more suffering, no more tears, no more illness but instead there will be joy forever, love and peace and healing. Anything really good that we have a glimpse of here will be there fully revealed and enjoyed for ever.

What a great thing to look forward to – everything here will fade away and be completely eclipsed by our eternal home. This life will seem like a distant memory – an echo – a very pale reflection – something on the border of memory. How good will that be!

Is that the end of the journey then?

No – that will be just the end of the beginning – the journey goes on for ever – always fresh and never boring. God has planned this from the beginning of time. Eternal life is the only thing that makes sense of this world – otherwise why would Jesus have needed to die for us. He died for us that we might live – forever – with him.

But is all this just for us? We who have heard the good news and responded to Jesus and have given our lives to him?

By no means:

We are witnesses

God calls us to be his witnesses – to stand up and describe what he has done. Jesus was clear about this when he spoke to his disciples:

LK 24:45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

And we don't have to do it in our own strength – Jesus said:

AC 1:8you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

All through the book of acts, the disciples described what had happened and who Jesus was. They kept using the phrase "we are witnesses to this". This is a powerful statement and it is difficult for people to argue against.

If you think of a witness in a court of law – they are called to testify – to give their testimony. There are different sorts of witnesses there – normal witnesses who saw or heard something or know something relevant, professional witnesses who are involved because of their professional job, and expert witnesses who bring special expertise to give an expert opinion on whatever the issue is.

We are just called to be normal witnesses – we don't need special expertise or professional status. All we need is to tell the truth, the

whole truth and nothing but the truth. If we tell our story, it is powerful and real and it will make an impact on people who haven't met God yet as well as encouraging fellow Christians in their journey. That is our testimony as we testify to what God has done in the journey of our lives.

We are not on our own

Not only are we given power to testify about Jesus, but we are surrounded by others who can also testify to what God has done. Hebrews 12 sums it up:

HEB 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

That's the bigger picture – our journey isn't one we have to make on our own. We are designed to be in it together – to encourage and lift each other up and strengthen each other when our journeys take us through difficult paths and stormy blasts.

Together we will not grow weary or lose heart, but live our lives for God and be witnesses to the world that certainly needs good news.