

Text: Joshua 3

Theme: You can cross the River with God

Sermon delivered by Revd Canon Dele Agbelusi during New Year's Eve Service on 31/12/2017 at 11.00pm

If you are reading this reflection, you must have crossed over from 2017 to 2018. Congratulations. But what lies ahead in 2018 is still a mystery and to many it is intimidating because of either the failures of the past or the lack of faith to tap into available resources to make the year fruitful. This was the experience of the children of Israel as they converged at the wilderness side of River Jordan. You will need to read Joshua 3:1-18 to have the real flavour of the rest of this article.

The Israelites did not know what lay ahead. Their only reconnaissance had come from the exaggerated reports of a few spies. Not only did they face the Jordan River at flood stage; but on the other side they would confront the walled cities of fierce Canaanite fighters. Does this reflect your apprehensions for 2018? You are not alone. I have some unfinished business in my life also just like the Israelites in our passage. So, **what can we learn from God's dealings with them which will equip us to navigate through the coming year "River Jordan" successfully?**

First and foremost, we must realise that God's ways are not always our ways. We can't get to the other side in our own strength. **Sometimes God places us in circumstances where we have to throw our hands up and say: I can't cope with this.** I can't cope with a state of joblessness. I can't cope with the situation in my family or my marriage...And God's answer is often: I know you can't – not on your own. But my power is made perfect in weakness

And the prouder and self-reliant we are, the more painful that lesson is going to be when God summons us for a real-life tutorial. And so, when you're on the edge of a flooded jungle swamp and God says, "OK, it is time to cross over, it is time to trust and obey," do you look at the realities before your eyes and say: "Utter madness; you must be joking."

For the ancient Hebrews and for us, faith then becomes critical. Faith is the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Heb. 11:1) **Faith is being willing to venture with God, blindfolded.** At Joshua's commissioning, God repeatedly exhorted Joshua, "Be strong and courageous." God called Joshua to lead Israel into the land that he had promised Israel's ancestors. God promised that he would go with Joshua. God promised Joshua success. But promises still required action. If Joshua was to experience the fulfilment of God's promises, he had to muster up the courage to lead the people into the Promised Land.

Why courage? C.S. Lewis captured the crucial role that courage plays when he wrote, **"Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at its testing point." Courage is the initial step in the journey that connects the dots between God's promises and their fulfilment.**

God gave some clear instructions for crossing the Jordan River as the Israelites faced up to their own utter helplessness to accomplish what it set before them (Joshua 3:1-2). At that time, the people of Israel saw a rushing river, swollen with spring rains lying in front of them. They must have asked, "How can we ever cross this river which was also in flood season?"

God instructed that the ark of God would lead the way (**verses 3-5**). Joshua didn't send his Army Corps of Engineers first. Instead, **he sent the priests who carried the ark of the**

covenant, which was the visible representation of God's presence with the people. Joshua knew this was a spiritual problem, not a feat of human engineering.

Consecrate yourself – set yourself apart from common things in order to focus on the LORD, and to see that the LORD will do wonders among you. Because this would be a spiritual battle, Joshua required that the people have a spiritual preparation.

So, the first way the Lord prepares his people is to get them to focus on His presence among them. "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests...you are to move out from your positions and follow it. The ark was the visible symbol of The Lord's presence. In times of great stress and anxiety about the future, God's people need constant reminders of the Lord's presence among them.

But what's the function of the Lord's presence in verses 2-4 when you are expected to keep at a good distance from it? When you're driving along a motorway you get lots of signs don't you? Signs telling you what's coming up at the next junction, or those new digital signs that tell there's heavy traffic on the M18 or whatever. But if you get too close to the sign before you spot it, you can't read it properly or you might miss your junction completely. And that's the function of the ark here in v4. It's like a sort of giant moving motorway signpost. And that's what the Lord is doing here in v4. It's both a reassuring symbol of the Lord's presence. But it's also a challenging signpost telling them that he really did want them to cross the Jordan and move on to take possession of the Promised Land. So the Lord prepares His people for the task ahead firstly in v2-4 by focusing their attention on His presence; a presence that gives reassurance and direction.

But our faithful God found time to encourage Joshua (verses 7-8).

And the Lord says to Joshua: "I know how you're feeling that you can never live up to Moses' legacy. I know all about the mutterings in the congregation; I know what some people are saying about you, questioning whether you're up to the job and all that. So be encouraged: I have called you. Moses was simply my servant and now you're my servant. And I will publicly establish and confirm your leadership among the people so don't fear the people; be strong and courageous; fear me; trust and obey me and leave me to worry about getting the people to follow you."

The priests carrying the ark are told to go up to the river carrying the ark and wade into it. And as soon as they do, as soon as their feet touch the water, the river will be cut off upstream. It seems like madness. The ark was heavy. They could be washed away by the current. Would they trust God and do what seems like a crazy thing? But even if they got to the other side, they'd have an even bigger challenge: to take on the fortified city of Jericho and then drive out all the well-armed inhabitants of the Promised Land: the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites.

And so what God is basically saying in v9-13 is this: I'll get you through the Jordan just as I have promised, but against all human odds. And that will give you the confidence to trust the rest of my promises for the future: the promise that I really will drive out the inhabitants of the Promised Land so you can move in and take it over.

The impossible problems in their way are not seen as an oppressive trial, but as a glorious opportunity to see God work.

But, just like the Israelites, we need to act on the basis of those promises. We need to step out in obedience and take hold of what's been promised. Because if we disobey the Lord's commands, then as we see in the rest of Joshua and the Old Testament, we'll personally forfeit the promised blessings. **The Lord always keeps His promises to His people. But**

His people are defined by those who have faith in him and his promises. So, let me ask you: are you one of His people? Are you trusting in the Lord's promise of forgiveness and salvation and in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ alone?

And even if you are, what else is the Lord challenging you about in your Christian life? What issue of obedience is He putting His finger on today? Are there areas in your life you're not fully trusting Him?

Who knows for how long the priests stood there in the river? It might have been a moment; but it may have been a long time - but in a situation like that, a moment seems like a long time! We usually want the river to be dry before we even make a step; but God was truly calling Israel to step out in faith. And as he did so the formidable Jordan became a passage to God's unfolding favour and abundance.

The Jordan is stopped (16-17) and the people cross over on dry ground. This miracle obviously connects with the miracle the nation knew some 40 years earlier: the passing through the Red Sea. God brought them out of Egypt's bondage with a miracle, and He brought them in to the Promised Land with a miracle.

How did it happen? What was the key to this amazing miracle? Notice the centrality of the ark of the covenant of the LORD. The ark is referred to 14 times in these 17 verses. This was all about the trust Joshua, the priests, and Israel had in the God they knew was present with them.

Jesus is the fulfilment of the ark; He is Immanuel, which is translated, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Jesus has cleared the way to victory over all things: Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross (Colossians 2:15). As we keep our eyes on Him, and follow behind our victorious Jesus, the river of impossibility will dry up. Say Amen!

God kept His promise because God always keeps His promises. But the challenge for God's people then and now is to trust and obey Him in light of those promises, even when those promises and commands seem out of this world. And when we are tempted to doubt that, let's remember Joshua and the Jordan. Let's remember that no obstacle is too big for the Lord to overcome.

A story is told of a ship that was being tossed by a storm and people were rushing to grab their life-jackets. While the ship's crew started helping people, they found a boy sitting in a corner in the deck enjoying an ice-cream. A crew-member asked the boy, "Are you not afraid we are in trouble?" Quick came the reply, "Why should I be afraid when my dad is the captain of the ship? He will surely steer us to safety". Make God the captain of your life. He will steer you through the darkest nights.

Will you trust God as you should not just for your salvation, but in the details of life in this world too? Will you put your faith in the Lord who can give you direction and assure you of His presence?

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you that you are totally sovereign not just over the universe you created but also over all the details of our everyday lives. Help us to trust your promises for the future and especially for 2018, knowing that you've made every necessary preparation and provided us with every encouragement we need. Help us to focus on your presence through your Holy Spirit and to reflect on your teaching, so that we might trust you more fully and praise you more joyfully. In Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**