**30th October 2011**

**Focus scripture: Joshua 3:7–17**

Who’d be a leader? Who’d be a church leader? Pertinently, who’d be the Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral? St Pauls Cathedral in London has had a protest camp outside it now for a couple of weeks as demonstrators rally against capitalism and the excesses of the banking system. The Dean of the Cathedral, after asking the protestors to move on, has taken steps to legally enforce their removal. This has prompted a number of clergy at the Cathedral to resign, not wanting to be associated with this action and having to justify the cathedral’s position if violence broke out as a result of the eviction.

The Bishop of Buckingham, Alan Wilson, condemned the managers of St Paul’s for their "hysterical overreaction" in shutting the cathedral. “Do they have the stomach to engage in the real world at the crest of a tidal race between people, money and power, or are they just overgrown public schoolboys playing indoor games in their own self-important Tourist Disneyland?”

Shutting the doors of St Paul's for a week or so cost the cathedral about £16,000 a day in lost revenue. Many of the benefactors of the Cathedral are the investment banks that the protesters are campaigning against. The Cathedral attempts through the St Paul’s institute to raise the very same issues that the Occupy London Stock Exchange protestors are campaigning for – but they do it by working quietly with financial institutions encouraging a just and ethical business practice.

Who’d be a church leader? You can see why the Independent newspaper had on its front page yesterday the headline ‘God versus mammon’.

As the minister in charge of an old church building that needs constant funds for its upkeep I have, on one level, sympathy with the Dean of St Paul’s. My natural inclination is to work with all bodies constructively. But as a follower of Jesus Christ, which is what surely belonging to church is all about in the first place, my gut feeling in answer to question what would Jesus do, or reframing the question differently, where would Jesus be? – my gut feeling is that Jesus wouldn’t be in the Cathedral but he’d be outside on the steps.

Moments like this are crunch issues that leaders have to take. It is a heavy responsibility.

Leadership is on Jesus’ mind as he calls attention to the ego-centred leadership of the scribes and Pharisees in **Matthew 23:1–12**. No titles like “rabbi” for the disciples! Their leadership is to be God-centred and servant-focused.

Here is a list of Jesus' criticisms about religious leadership in his day:

They did not practice what they taught (hypocrisy).  
They put heavy burdens on others but not themselves (legalism).  
They sought and loved public recognition (pride).  
Status, respect and titles were important to them (arrogance).  
They locked people out of the kingdom (judgmental).  
They established laws to benefit themselves (greed).  
They neglected to emphasize justice and mercy (bias).  
They were accomplices to silencing the prophets (oppressive).

Who’d be a leader?

Before I went away for a holiday I was looking at the leadership of Moses in the Old Testament. Following the death of Moses, the story of the people of Is­rael continues under Joshua’s leadership. Joshua’s first task is to lead the people across the Jordan River into the land of promise. The passage makes it clear that God’s intention is to elevate Joshua “in the sight of all Israel” to an authority like that of Moses.

Moses is a hard act to follow. Joshua had been well trained by his mentor however. **The first thing to note in his leadership is that he** **let God exalt him. He didn’t exalt himself**. Good leaders are usually humble leaders. Arrogance in a Christian leader is unbefitting of one who claims to follow Jesus, the one who was prepared to wash others feet.

A young seminary graduate came up to the lectern, very self-confident and immaculately dressed. He began to deliver his first sermon in his first church and the words simply would not come out. Finally he burst into tears and ended up leaving the platform obviously humbled.

There were two older ladies sitting in the front row and one remarked to the other, "If he'd come in like he went out, he would have gone out like he came in."

Jesus calls us to a real trust in God and to humble service in his church and world. The temptation is ever before us to exalt ourselves - to impress others, to make a name for ourselves. That was not how Jesus came, nor was it why he came.

God usually has a way of puncturing your bubble of over importance. Hopefully it is in gentle ways. One pastor tells of his excitement of bringing into church membership a university professor. The pastor endeavoured to prepare and to deliver better sermons from the pulpit, as this prospective member continued to attend worship. Later, while reflecting with the professor after he joined the church, the pastor found that the professor's joining had less to do with the sermons he heard and more to do with an elderly woman who consistently made him feel so welcomed and valued. That was what moved him into Christian community. Servant hood over showmanship wins hearts in many, many places.

**Secondly Joshua waited on God**. In an important way leaders are also people who are led. Led by God. Of course God leads in many different ways, mysterious ways sometimes. It is important to wait on God for the lead. Joshua says to the Israelites come here and listen to the words of your God.

At the heart of the crossing of the Jordan is the ark, a portable shrine. The ark of Israel contained the two stone tablets of the Law brought by Moses from Mount Sinai (see Exodus 34). It was present in the ongoing life of the people was a sign of “God with us.” It also was a source of divine power as the people of Israel faced obstacles in the journey to define their political and religious identity. It was the physical manifestation of God’s presence with them.

The manner by which God is about to bring Israel across the Jordan River , the eastern boundary of the promised land, will bring assurance that the one true God is with them and that he will surely dislodge the present inhabitants of Canaan. Two fundamental issues were at stake: who is the true and mighty God – the god of Israel of the gods on whom the Canaanites depend including Baal, who was believed to reign as king among the gods because he triumphed over the sea god? By opening the way through the flooded Jordan the Lord would show both Israel and the Canaanites that he is the Lord over the waters. And that he is able to establish his own order in the world.

Second issue – who has the rightful claim to the land? The Lord or the Canaanites? By passing g safely through the Jordan at the head of the army the Lord showed his rightness of his claim to the Land.

In the ancient near eastern world a common way for obtaining the judicial verdict of the gods was by compelling the accused to submit to trial by water ordeal. Usually this involved casting them down into a river (if the accused drowned, the gods had found them guilty; if not the gods had declared them innocent). Significantly the whole Israelite army would cross safely over the Jordan and the Lord’s claim on the land would be vindicated before the eyes of all who saw and heard about it.

The Israelites capture of the Promised Land and the expulsion of the existing inhabitants of course raises huge issues which are still with us today as Israeli’s live alongside Palestinians in disputed lands. But we would need a week or more to talk through that one.

Going back to the relevance to us of the first issue ‘who is the true and mighty God?’ - Halloween kicks off tomorrow. It derives from the Celtic pagan festival of Samhain and praying for the dead. I used to be relaxed about Halloween – I used to think it was a bit of fun and nonsense– but I have become increasingly more concerned because it seems to increasingly trivialize – or worse still celebrate – [paganism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paganism), the [occult](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occult), or other practices and cultural phenomena such as trick or treating, which to put it bluntly are incompatible with Christian beliefs. Who is the true and mighty God? If you follow Christ - don’t go off dabbling in other gods and opening yourself up to others powers and influences. Wait on God.

Which also means trust God. Joshua didn’t demand things from God or ask for a sign so that he would trust and believe in God. He waited on God to instruct him and to lead him in faith. Remember the devil tempted Jesus to demand that God save him and Jesus said do not put the Lord your God to the test. Many people will believe in God if God does this or that for them. That is faith the wrong way round! Joshua here mirrors a faith that waits on God and acts in faith to God’s leading.

God tells the Israelites though Joshua to take the Ark of the Covenant down to the river and take a step into the water at which point the river will divide.

In the late spring the Jordan the river is in flood. So the picture is that the Israelites first step into the water of the flood plain (at many points more than a mile wide), but that the flow of the river (precariously dangerous, due to sudden variations in depth, and to the swiftness of the flow) is stopped up before they proceed into the deepest parts. The water stands up in a "bank"

What dammed the water? History records instances of a bank collapsing upstream, temporarily stopping up the Jordan's flow. An earthquake precipitated such a landslide on July 11, 1927; the waters were withheld for twenty-one hours!. The story, though, has no intrinsic interest in earthquakes and landslides, but has its eyes open for the "mighty acts" of God.

The book of Joshua is full of historical and geographic detail. Because of this, it has faced scrutiny in books and documentaries that address the factuality of biblical accounts, particularly in the light of archaeological discoveries. Ultimately the question we have to answer is not “Did it happen this way?” but rather “What does it mean?”

One way of responding to that question is to note that the importance is in the conviction that we, too, can step out into the unknown waters of God’s future, trusting that God will be with us.

How remarkable it is that Israel's twin stories of deliverance and occupation involve the parting of waters. The primal, almost mythological, sense of the danger and power of bodies of water, Israel sensed a profound rescue from the most visceral sort of peril in these miracles. Perhaps this begins to explain the ongoing power of the story. In modern hymnody, crossing over Jordan has become a powerful metaphor for personal, political, and indeed ultimate hope.

Moses had died and Joshua is in charge, they are at a critical point, they have been here before. (This is where you either breakdown or you breakthrough).  
This is where you decide if the dream is worth it.  
Its one thing to dream it’s another thing to take possession of that dream.  
  
Every dreamer will come to this place, it is here that dreamers either go over or go under. It is called Jordan  
  
There are only two choices (1) cross over into the promise or (2) settle down on this side of Jordan and give up your dream  
  
Jordan is a place that is God ordained, It is a place of impossibility, it is a place of weakness, helplessness, It is the place where all self effort dies, it is where we come face to face with our selves.  
  
You may face your Jordan during a time of sickness, or a time of great financial difficulty, or a time of family turmoil.  
God is not the author of sickness, and disease, and poverty, and hardship, but as we face these things we come to an end of ourselves.  
  
So Jordan is a dividing line, it’s the place where we are forced to decide are we going to trust in the living God? Or are we going to trust in the flesh and our own self effort? Yet the river is deep and wide – they couldn’t cross in their own strength.

But they need to take the first step.  
It wasn’t until the priest’s feet were dipped in the water that the waters began to recede, (nothing happened until they stepped in and got their feet wet, and (they had to have enough vision of the promise and enough faith in God to get them off the bank into the water). They had to have faith to put the soles of their feet in the water.  
  
Nothing will happen until you step off the riverbank of your life. It is a step of faith.  
  
It is interesting: This is probably the same place where Jesus was “baptized by John.”   
It is the place where Jesus also went under the water. It is a point of submission.  
  
Then as they walked the waters fled before them  
One of our biggest problems is, we want to see victory before we ever get into the fight, We want to see the end before we ever start, it seems to be the pattern that God operates on a need to know basis, he only gives you what you need to know = (enough to get you started).

Fear grips us at the moment of decision. We get right to the edge, and all of a sudden we become afraid and focus on the problem rather than on the Lord. We start to worry: What are people going to think? What about my reputation? What if God doesn’t come through?

I’d rather step out, believing God told me to do something than never step out and never see anything happen. I would rather risk failing than never take a risk at all. A. B. Simpson said, “Be afraid of your fears…they will pierce your heart and hinder your advancement.”

Got any rivers you think are uncrossable? Got any mountains you can’t tunnel through? God specializes in things thought impossible -- He does the things others cannot do.   
· What kind of river do you face today?   
· Perhaps it is a river of bitterness and anger standing between you and God’s peace?   
· Is it a raging flood of addiction, keeping you away from intimacy with God?  
· Is your river a river of discouragement or depression?   
  
Whatever obstacle you may be facing, do you believe God can see you through it?  
Are you at Jordan’s edge? Crucially is God prompting you to step in, to move on, and to go forward into a land of promise? If he isn’t then don’t move – you’ll drown. But if he is – are you going to get your toes wet?

Joshua is remembered as a great successor to Moses. He didn’t exalt himself but let God exalt him. He waited on God. He responded in faith and took that step into the waters of Jordan.