

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Hebrews 11:1-16.

A proper answer to the question in our sermon title is 'On pilgrimage.' This is what we learn from our passage. We are strangers and pilgrims here on earth and we are seeking a better, that is a heavenly country. So, in many ways, the best answer we can give to the question in the title is that we are still on pilgrimage to heaven.

This is a question that we have asked ourselves, as a church, from time to time over the last two and a half years. As a church we are in the happy position, as of last Monday, of being able to say that the major building work that we discovered needed attending to in December 2018 has now been accomplished thanks to the Lord's goodness to us. It has been journey of faith that we have been on and we thank God that we have reached where we have, although we also recognize that there is still a long way to go with the building. Much has happened in that time. We have experienced considerable upheaval and considerable changes in our circumstances.

When we were looking at this subject some few years back, we identified the lack of gospel success as a critical factor behind the pressures that we were feeling as a fellowship, lacking people and finance. We are, quite a few of us, getting ever older and the same amount work is falling upon fewer people to do. Over this period, we have lost some friends who have gone home to glory. Others have felt they no longer wanted to walk with us in the gospel endeavour here and now worship elsewhere. Besides that, it goes without saying there has been the impact of the pandemic and the challenges that this has presented to us, both during lockdown, and coming out of lockdown. Perhaps we have some hope at the moment that we will soon be able to relax some of the restrictions that we have been subject to for the last year.

So where are we now on our pilgrimage?

1. Still open.

We may be pilgrims but we are also members or parts of a local church. The local church remains just that – a church situated in a particular place as a witness (Matthew 5:14-16). We are the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16-17) and as such we are static. We remain in one place. We come together to meet in one place (1 Corinthians 14:23,26). So we are pilgrims but we are in one place.

It may seem a small thing in our eyes but it is a token of God's blessing that we are still open. The work could have collapsed. The demands and pressures of the last

couple of years could have capsized the ship. Instead, we are still present as a witness in this community and beyond. The word is still preached, an evangelistic work, though reduced by COVID, is still taking place and there is a local church, duly constituted with its articles of faith.

2. Weary pilgrimage.

But the pilgrimage takes its toll on the body and the mind. Maintaining the work, given the small size and general age of our company, has been a tiring task. We feel our fragility as we look round and realize that there are not many of us, that we are getting older, and that quite a few folk have experienced great changes in their circumstances. Philip Doddridge in his hymn, 'O God of Bethel' writes this as the opening verse,

*O God of Bethel! By whose hand
Thy people still are fed;
Who through this weary pilgrimage
Hast all our fathers led:*

The thought of 'weary pilgrimage' captures something of where we are now. We are with the pilgrims of Hebrews 11. But is a weary pilgrimage, bearing our losses and crosses, our sadnesses and griefs, while experiencing remarkable grace and care, as did our 'fathers' in the faith. So there are some simple matters to remind ourselves about as we look perhaps for some relief and desire further grace from heaven.

So we should give ourselves all the more to prayer. Weariness can lead to prayerlessness. That would be a backwards step. Now, all the more we need to be praying with faith to the God of Bethel. A prayer, such as we find in Ephesians 3:14-19, has much to teach us. We need the Lord to sustain us and strengthen us. We need to be more and more convinced about the love of Christ towards us. Out of the depths of that love, we will be able to speak about the Lord, opening our mouths as we should to make Him known (Ephesians 6:18-20). We should pray out of the sense of the reproach in which the church is held in our land (Isaiah 37:1-4). As we see where we are, do we not feel an urgent need to pray? Do we not, looking at the state of so many churches, not see the need for urgent help from heaven?

Then there is a great need for our sanctification. The people in the wilderness lapsed into unbelief and most of them perished there, not having entered the promised rest, the promised land. Sanctification is the key to so much, including our evangelism. A Christ who is actively cleansing us and developing our appetite for spiritual things is a Christ we will speak more easily and meaningfully about. We also are in the process of becoming the kinds of vessels that the Lord will fill with His Spirit. Christ will dwell in our hearts (Galatians 5:22-26; Ephesians 4: 25-32). Sanctified people are people with clear consciences, boldness, integrity and spiritual power.

Then, a mainstay in our weary pilgrimage, is the fellowship of like-minded people, both within the local church and between local churches. We are able to strengthen each other (2 John 12-13; 3 John 13-14). Here is our common life where we are an encouragement to each other, moving away from self-centredness, judgmentalism and carelessness, where instead mutual trust flourishes and we bear one another's burdens.

3. Keep the end in view.

As in the passage in Hebrews 11:13-16, we are always looking beyond to the final destination, heaven itself. This is a pilgrimage that we are on. It is not a permanent state of affairs. Neither is our being part of a local church forever. One day we move from being part of the church militant on earth to being with the church triumphant in heaven. Our days on earth are soon finished and we go to be with the Lord.

So we might at times move forward with sorrow but we are sustained by a heavenly vision. We are looking to the day when these former things pass away, and we are welcomed into our glorious home above.

In the end, our labours on earth are small and their impact slight. And whatever worthwhile things are achieved are solely to be attributed to the power of God working in us. In the end, it remains forever true that we are saved by grace and not by works. Our best efforts remain but feeble things. We look on to our everlasting rest and to be with Christ, which is far better.