



A different spirit (Numbers 13:1-24)

One of the things I've never been afraid to do is take things apart to find out how they work and then put them back together again. My parents were always annoyed when I took all my Christmas presents apart because somehow I never quite managed to get them back together properly.

Since I've had an interest in computers, I found that in particular, it's quite easy to take them apart and put them back together again. I recently took Bethan's computer to bits because the power supply was playing up. I decided to put it into a new case with a new power supply. This was an interesting challenge because it was a different sort of supply and it demanded a bit of working out and Bethan and Rhiannon looked worried as all the bits ended up on our dining room table and then all the spaghetti went into the new case. After a lot of tinkering around, the thing now works again.

To most people, the inside of a computer looks a daunting piece of work. There is a very complicated circuit board called the Motherboard with lots of different connectors and wires. Then there are various components like the disk drives and the memory. And then there are the cables - all different types. For most of you, I suspect you would not want to touch it - even if you had a *Computers for Dummies* textbook.

That's really how it was when the twelve spies went to spy out Canaan. It was a wonderful land of promise. Compared to the wilderness they were in, it was a land of paradise. The problem was that it was full of Canaanites!

That is so true of our Christian pilgrimage. We have left Egypt and we are on our journey and we can see where we are headed but the road can be difficult with many battles ahead and we become discouraged. This passage in Numbers was one of those critical times for the people of Israel. They were in the wilderness, they were already in trouble. They had grumbled all the way there despite God's merciful provision for them in food and water and despite of the Tabernacle being that ever present symbol at the centre of the camp that God was with them. What can we learn from their experience.

🕒 It is easy to lose our perspective when we are down

For the majority of the spies Canaan was too much. The thought of fighting giants and battling the fortified towns was too much and that is the message they gave to the people. And what did we read? They grumbled. *"If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?"* And they said to each other, *"We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."*

What was their problem. Hadn't they seen the plagues? Hadn't they experienced the Passover? Hadn't they passed through the Red Sea? Hadn't they learned anything about the power and presence of God even though it stood testimony to them at the centre of the camp?

Here were a people in a state of unbelief even though they should have known better. They had experienced God's judgement before too. And what sort of welcome did they expect to get back in Egypt? Not very good considering their army was wiped out in the Red Sea after all their firstborn had been killed!

Unbelief and backsliding in Christians never makes sense if they have experienced the glory of God expressed in Christ. yet maybe you have backslidden yourself or know somebody like that. It never makes sense. How could we go back to Egypt? How could we not desire the promised land? How could we not enter in and be victorious when God had given it to us? he's the powerful, mighty One and there is none that can stand against Him!

Yet unbelief is easy to slip into even if we have seen God at work. As we come up to the end of one year and enter another when we are going to see the completion of something that seemed like a dream only a couple of years back, we give God the glory.

Yet I still get comments like "we can never be a large church" or "we've seen it all before and in a few years we will be back where we were" or "I preferred things as they were" or "why can't we do things like we used to". "We want to go back to Egypt because the Promised Land of revival and renewal are just the pipe-dream of our silly minister and a small minority of people who are stupid enough to listen to him!"

Really? Let's move on in Numbers:

The glory of the Lord appeared amongst them

The people turned against Moses and Aaron - who faced them. And their minority of supporters spoke - the minority of two spies who realised that Canaan was there for the taking.

6 Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes 7 and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. 8 If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. 9 Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them." 10 But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites.

They understood who God was and that He had given them that land and all they needed to do was take it. *Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites.* The bottom line was that Israel were God's people. The people had spoken against Him. The faithful few had defended His cause. But in the end God spoke because it was He that had brought them out of Egypt. It was He who had sustained them in the wilderness. It was He who was present in the camp. It was not for them to decide what God could and could not do. He had made a covenant with His people and He had promised to fulfil it.

Yet these people had questioned that? How much do we question what God can and can't do? God has given us the task of rebuilding His Church here. He wants us to be a vibrant fellowship that brings people to Christ and helps them achieve their potential. But is that possible when we seem to be so few? We understood last week that God builds His church in countries where it is illegal to believe let alone be church. And it is in those places that some of the fastest growing churches are today. Why/ Because God is not the God of the possible but of the impossible. The church is growing in China because it is His church and His people risk life and limb to obey Him.

And what about us? It is easy to think in the world's terms. We've seen how the visible church has declined all around us. What do we say? "Maybe it's our turn next. We can't do much". Or do we recognise it's His Church and enter into what is our promised right - to see the power of God in action as He extends His kingdom.

And the glory of the Lord came amongst them - things got serious!

God is angry with those disobeying Him

The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? 12 I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they."

This wasn't the first incident in which the people had grumbled and rebelled against God. These words show the extent to which He was exasperated with these people. They had refused to believe - perhaps trust is a better translation here - even though they had seen all the miracles. This was followed by this offer to Moses *I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.* He had promised to make Israel into a great nation but they had let Him down. God's purposes could have been achieved by some other route - through Moses.

Sometimes that is exactly what happens. When God's people disobey Him, then His purposes are achieved by someone else who is raised up. History is dotted with incidents where old ministries die and new ones are raised up. It's true of churches too. The national decline we are experiencing now is not unusual. It has happened before. Often new movements arise from decline rather than revived old ones. If existing churches do not obey, then God raises up others who will. They are usually the vanguard to which then the remnant follow until the church is revived afresh. It was certainly true in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and is true in many of the incidents of new life that has sprung up of recent years.

The message is simple. God calls us to obey Him, to follow Him and to do His work as His people. We are called to take the land and by the power of His Spirit, lead people to Christ. That's our call. But if we don't do it, then someone else will be raised up and they will do it. And our church?

But He is long-suffering

Moses is amazing here. He boldly intercedes for the people of Israel and makes a strong plea for them. He does it on the basis of God's honour by first arguing that their destruction would not vindicate Himself to the surrounding nations. But he then goes on to say these words:

17 "Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, just as you have declared: 18 'The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.' 19 In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now."

Moses had understood a basic truth of God which we sometimes like to play down when we want to say as I have that the Lord is angry with those who disobey Him. If we look through the whole of the passage of the Israelites in the wilderness we see incident after incident where they disobey God, yet He does not destroy them. Moses had understood God. He knew that the punishment of God is severe on a people and a nation that disobey Him. He had a clear idea of sin - God does not leave the guilty

unpunished. He knew all about the consequences of sin in a people and nation - that sin is punished to the third and fourth generation. I could do a sermon on that quite easily. But the important piece of understanding is that God is slow to anger and he readily pardons sin.

God is One who is slow to anger. He is patient. He is long-suffering. He does not rush to place judgement on people. This is an important truth we need to understand. He is a God of second chances and opportunities. God blessed Israel in the wilderness with His presence, with manna, with water, with the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. How did they respond? *We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.* In the end He does not leave the guilty unpunished and He contemplates their destruction.

Just because we sin and there seems to be no immediate consequences does not mean that God has ignored it. Just because nothing seems to happen when we disobey God does not mean that it does not matter to Him. He is a God who is slow to anger and abounding in love. I believe that is the message to His church in Britain today. I believe that He wants us to know that here in Swaffham too.

He is *slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.* Let's get the message here tonight. God is long-suffering. He is doing a new thing here. Don't even dream of going back to Egypt! Egypt is gone. We have to move forward and let Him lead HIS church into the promised land.

 **Don't miss out on the blessing**

God listened to Moses' plea for the people and they weren't destroyed but they missed out on the blessing. Only two of the men who left Egypt ever saw the promised land. The rest died in the wilderness.

We have the vision to see God glorified. If we desire to go back to Egypt then as a church we will die in the wilderness sooner or later. Many already have. Look at the catalogue of past decline and failure in Norfolk and maybe that has gone to the third and fourth generation because it has been a long time since the gospel thrived in rural Norfolk, perhaps for almost a century since the golden days when the chapel was built and extended. I don't believe that for such a time as this we are called to repeat past failure and experience another false dawn.

This is God's church and we have to move on with Him and not desire the past or even the comfort of the present, but go forward with Him.

We need to be people of a different spirit as Joshua and Caleb were - and inherit the promises. As we come around the Lord's table this evening, let's come in repentance and recommit ourselves to His work.

