

Preach on Me

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[0 : 00] Well, my thanks to Tommy for his welcome and his invitation in the first place to come and join with you this evening service. I will do my best to speak clearly in this foreign language that you can hear, which is British English instead of your kind.

Especially, I think, as some of you have been listening to lots of the word being preached over this weekend already. But it's a great privilege to me to come and be here with you this evening. And to turn your attention back to part of the Old Testament reading that we heard a little while ago. I'll tell you what it is in due course. But you may have noticed from your order of service that the subject is preach on me.

It doesn't actually mean preach on me, and that means me. It has to do, though, with the Old Testament reading, which was familiar to me from a fairly recent experience.

Because this time last week, I was in Pittsburgh, and I was preaching there also in a church. That was the Church of the Incarnation. Which, like the Church of the Advent here, is in league, I understand, with the Anglican Church in North America.

[1 : 20] And I guess with good reason. Some of you know the ins and outs of church politics that lie behind that. But it's a great privilege, as I say, to be with another congregation of the same kind.

They use a lectionary, a list of Bible readings, just as you do here. And one has this experience sometimes, if one is a preacher of the Word of God.

You turn to a part of the Bible which may be familiar or unfamiliar, and something jumps out at you.

A text is right there in front of you, and it says, Preach on me!

Numbers 11, I thought. What's there in Numbers 11? There it was, if you've got your Bibles open still. Numbers chapter 11.

Preach on me, it said, and it was Numbers 11, verses 4 and 5. Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving, and the people of Israel also wept again and said, Oh, that we had meat to eat.

[2 : 29] We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, and the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manner to look at.

What on earth caught my attention about those verses? Well, that was the reason for the verses. Well, that was the reason for the verses. And to explain that, I have to go back in a little bit of personal history.

My father was employed for 40 years by a mission agency as a missionary, but not a missionary in another country than England.

He was a missionary in London, and he worked with the London City Mission. His job was on every weekday of the week to go out in one or other of the blue-collar areas of South London with the gospel, going from door to door with the Bible in his hand and the gospel in his heart.

And on Sundays, he also had the care of a little church in South London, and there he would preach. And as I look back over his ministry, I've come to the conclusion that he was a very good evangelist and a very good preacher.

[3 : 54] That's to say that he had a very good God who gave him those gifts, and he taught him how to use them. An evangelist, but also a preacher. And sometimes in much more recent years, because I've been a preacher myself for quite a while now, I have sometimes found myself arriving at a church where my father preached many years before me.

And quite often, an older person in the congregation has come up to me and said, We knew your father. He preached in this church.

And we still remember what he preached on. I said, Oh, yes. We remember the onions. We remember the onions.

That's right, it's a verse in the book of Numbers. We just heard it. We remember the onions. Well, they remember the onions. Well, they remember the sermon, which was more than I did, because I never heard it.

But although I've got some of Dad's sermons still around the place, and I still think they're pretty good. This one I never located. But what would it have been? We remember the onions.

[5 : 11] That's why I chose the title, Preach on Me, because it was a verse that leapt off the page, demanding it to be preached on.

And that's why I chose that verse. Because Dad had preached it, and it stuck in somebody's mind that way. Well, I don't know what he would have said.

As I say, I never heard it. But I do believe that I know what he wants me to say to you about it. That it's a word for all of us in this particular place at this particular time.

And I want to turn your attention back there to Numbers chapter 11. And I want to take a verse out of that chapter and link it with a verse in the next book of the Bible, in the book of Deuteronomy.

And draw your attention to the fact that in each of these two verses, you're going to hear something about a forward march. And something about a backward look.

[6 : 16] First of all then, Numbers 11, verse 5. If you have the Bible open in front of you, you may like to look at it. The people of Israel wept again and said, Oh, that we had meat to eat.

We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, and the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks. We remember the onions. And we remember the garlic.

What was the forward march? The great interest of this particular chapter is that it's part of the long, ongoing story of the life of the people of God, as God calls them to come from where they've been for a long time, into a journey, and at the end of the journey, a new land, which he has prepared for them.

And that's a story that will take up quite a chunk of the Old Testament. It's the forward march of God's people at this early stage of their history as a company of those who believe, or who at any rate say that they believe, in him.

I guess a number of you will know the writings of Eugene Peterson, who was for many years, I understand, a pastor of a church not all that far from here, and whose works many of you may know and value.

[7 : 44] His translation of the entire Bible, which he calls The Message, has a very interesting introduction to each book of the Bible, and in his introduction to the book of Numbers, he speaks like this.

He says, here is a company of believers, quite near the beginning of its journey, and they are gradually learning to look to God for, this is the theme he draws out of Numbers, they are learning to look to God for organizational help, and for relational help.

They need organizational help, so that they learn how to work together. They need relational help, so as to learn how to live together. And the greater part of the book is taken up, with God's people being taught those two great truths, to learn from the Lord.

And on the story goes, it's a very exciting story, a very romantic one, but what Eugene Peterson says about this particular part of it, it says, well, exciting and romantic it may be, but it's important to grasp, I quote, some of these less than romantic details by which we are formed into the people of God.

In other words, this is about the nitty-gritty of learning to belong to the people of God. It's not always easy. It's not always lovely. Some of it is hard graft.

[9 : 16] But that's the forward march, and that's something they have to begin to learn at that stage, and then go on learning all the time they are journeying on the way to the promised land, and indeed once they get there, as they continue to be the people of God, and eventually become the Church of Jesus Christ.

And here is this nitty-gritty stuff as they march forward into the future that God has prepared for them. Lessons that are going to hold good for the rest of their march through history.

So that out of this one verse in Numbers has to do with the forward march. It's all part of the forward march. We belong to the people of God. We step forward together. We have to learn to walk together as we move towards his goal.

Along with that, what you find here in Numbers 11, verse 5, is the backward look. Here's the forward march. Hope you're all moving forward together.

Says Moses, follow me. This is the way we're going. And then he hears about this backward look. This is where we arrive at our text. The people of Israel wept again and said, Oh, that we had meat to eat.

[10:36] We remember the fish we had in Egypt. It cost nothing. The cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up.

Nothing at all but this manner. The backward look. We remember the old days. As things are just at the moment, they say, God or no God.

Journey towards something better or not. All we've got to eat day by day is this manner. We're sick and tired of it. We remember the onions. We remember the good old days before we embark on this dreadful journey.

Well, when the day is demanding and the way is difficult and, well, demanding, difficult, you might say just plain dull.

Many of those days traveling through the wilderness must have been very dull days. And food becomes a matter of great concern to them.

[11:41] A focus of all their attention. And the backward look as they're moving, we hope, on the way forward that God has planned for them, the backward look is for some of the good things that they seem to have left behind.

And God has said, you had to leave them behind. You're not going to find onions in the wilderness. You're not going to find any of the goodies of Egypt on the way that I am taking you.

And that's when the manner for all it had kept them going for so long and would continue to do so for 40 years. And it was good to eat. But all the onions.

And how selective was their memory. How extraordinary that as they look back to those early days in that land of slavery, the one thing they isolated as a memory they cherished was the onions of Egypt.

Is that all you remember about Egypt? The onions and the melons and the garlic and all? Come on. You were there for 400 years and you know the conditions you suffered under.

[13:05] They got worse and worse and worse. And the day you came out of Egypt, you yourselves were celebrating your deliverance. and here you are and all you can think about is the onions you left behind.

The forward march of the people of God which continues through the whole of the Old Testament and on into the New and is still the journey that lies before us. That's what we're looking forward to. The Lord taking us on whichever way he intends to lead us. It'll be the right way and the best way and the straightest way though it may sometimes not seem so the straightest way home to heaven. But the backward look always still occasionally hanker for the onions. Now it seems to me that that's not unrelated to where many churches in America are at the present time.

I'm not quite sure if we in Britain are quite in the same position but there are sorts of things that we move forward towards and other things that we seem to be leaving behind and there are difficult decisions to be made.

[14:27] How are the people of God going to follow in his way especially when we're in this very curious and anomalous position which is not quite like where I come from of the Anglican church in North America.

I imagine that most of you will know something about the politics of the church that lie behind all this. And it seems to you as it certainly seems to me looking on as an outsider that there are certain things that you are going to be glad to be rid of in the Anglican church you grew up in.

That is still so in Britain. It's just that we haven't yet reached the parting of the ways and we hope there may be no parting of the ways.

But as you reach that point it's all very much a matter of the forward march which way are we going and what lies ahead and the backward look as to what we're going to have to leave behind us.

all these are difficult decisions to be made and things to be weighed up. And I want to take you on to the other verse I've got the other one of these two the first is there in Numbers chapter 11 verse 5 and the other one is in the very next book of the Bible in Deuteronomy this time it's chapter 8.

[15:56] Deuteronomy chapter 8 and again it's a verse which says something about the forward march and something about the backward look.

But I'll be wanting you to notice the difference between the forward march in Numbers 11 embarking on that great spirit led journey into the new life and the forward march here in Deuteronomy and similarly the contrast between the backward look of the folk who couldn't forget the onions and the backward look of the people in Deuteronomy.

Let's have a look now if you've got a Bible open in front of you it's Deuteronomy chapter 8 and the beginning of the chapter. I'll start at verse 1 the whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do that you may live and multiply and go in and possess the land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers and you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness.

the forward march well we're looking at it now from God's viewpoint the pattern of the whole story of that forward march it's the story of the church of God in the Old Testament and of the church of God in our New Testament days and the Lord is saying here at the beginning of Deuteronomy chapter 8 the Lord was leading you for these 40 years in the wilderness in order to humble you to test you to know what was in your heart whether you would keep his commandments or no and he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna which you didn't know nor did your fathers know so that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God so what's the forward march in the eyes of Deuteronomy chapter 8 from God's viewpoint it's his plan for that onward march and it's the fact that he has it all organized in advance and every step of the way including that mere 40 years in the wilderness with nothing to eat but manna that came from heaven and brothers and sisters no onions and all that they had to do with why you see what they were focused on was something that they missed and couldn't see why they should be deprived of it wasn't it cruel of God to take them on the terrible journey without any onions and he says don't you realize that the entire it's going to be 40 years the entire 40 years is part of my plan every detail of it is there

I fed you with manna for 40 years to teach you that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God there was a purpose in that setup it was on purpose that I gave you manna and not onions you had that narrow backward look to one particular thing that you really it was about the only thing you did like about Egypt wasn't it if you're honest you seem to forget that the whole thing that was there was part of slavery and I brought you out of that and everything that happens to you from this point on including the lack of the onions is designed to teach you they had that very narrow view of what had been going on hitherto and God has this extraordinary all embracing panoramic view of where he's leading them to and every detail in it is to be for their blessing as well as for his glory that was the forward march as Deuteronomy describes it from God's viewpoint it's all for your benefit in the long run why did he treat you like this so that he might humble you and test you and know what was in your heart there was a purpose all the way through and what should be your backward look is something well much bigger than the onions what I want you to realize he says is not just focusing on certain things you've had to give up in order to follow me but what I was actually doing when I brought you out of Egypt what I was doing was bringing you out of a place to which I had taken you in the first place and even your being there was part of my design

[21 : 13] I want you to learn the enormity and the extraordinary detail of my plans for my people please do not focus on the minutiae on the tiny things on the particulars which is about all you can remember that you did enjoy in Egypt how they've grown how they've been magnified in your memory come on get it in proportion they were only onions for heaven's sake and what I have in store for you is a land flowing with milk and honey out of whose hills you may dig brass and we'll never want for anything come on my children he says what I want you to have is a true view of what you've left behind and a true view of what you're going towards move please move please out of Numbers chapter 11 into Deuteronomy chapter 8 and I think that the present turmoils in Anglican churches worldwide which are quite extraordinarily interesting and one of the interesting things about them if I may say this in brackets is that

I find churches here are looking to Anglican archbishops in sundry places on the face of the globe and they include and have included over recent years as my memory goes back a few years not just to archbishops in Rwanda and Burundi and Uganda or even to the Archbishop of Nigeria which has more Anglican Christians than the whole of Britain has and Drexel of the West Indies Akinoli of Nigeria an old friend of mine who was Archbishop of the Southern Cone in South America and all these folk who've got the goods brothers and sisters they've got the goods which is more than I can

say of some of our bishops in England but you see through all this denomination as well as in every other denomination that you have folk who've got their priorities right and when they look backwards they say now one or two things good but we're glad to leave those things behind us and God has opened up for us something really exciting and interesting in the years that lie ahead and we say yes and here in the

United States it's come to a crunch am I right and the Anglican church is having to say well now do we stick with the people who've still got the vision or do we stick with the people who haven't it's not for me to answer that question but it hasn't come to us yet in Britain maybe it's on its way I think it's so interesting when the Archbishop of Canterbury is torn two ways and has two lots of bishops one on either side putting him in two different directions I find it so exciting to be here among your congregation at the Church of the Advent as at the Church of the Incarnation down there in Pittsburgh last Sunday to see that out of a mess God is saying come on my people leave the melons the onions the garlic and all that stuff they were just the condiments I've got something much nicer for you that lies ahead and follow me through the wilderness 40 years of it maybe but you'll see it's worth it in the long run let's pray together our gracious father we do thank you for the onward call to your people always at every stage of their history to be able to leave behind the things that need leaving behind and to follow through forwards to those things that need to be reached out to teach us a sense of proportion we pray that the things that don't really matter and the things we can afford to leave behind are left behind the things that do really matter the things that we need to reach forward to are the things that we do reach forward to we ask all this in Jesus name amen