

Sermon

LCA SA/NT District Bishop David Altus

Thursday 4 October 2018

Text: Exodus 13:17–22

'When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt". So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle. Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place". After leaving Sukkoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.'

Our wedding reception was held at the Murray Bridge Racecourse and I have lived with some Lutheran guilt about that for 38 years – until this Synod at Rosehill Racecourse!

I never thought we would end up here, and I wonder what it says about us today ...

An elderly couple were setting off on a journey. The husband looked to his wife and said: 'I promise to remember where we are going, if you promise to remember who we are!'

So, where are we going today 'Elsie' (LCA), and who are we along the way?

The people we meet in Exodus 13, that 'Synod' walking together on the road to freedom out of Egypt must have asked themselves where they were going and who they were now too, just like our Lutheran forebears must have asked those questions on the boats they came out here on.

In today's episode (13:17–22) I see three things that helped the Israelites and might just help us with where we are going today, and who we are along the way.

1. God took them the long way round to the promised land.

'God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter ... God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea' (v17).

Not the short way A–B, not the coastal, scenic route. God took them on the long, dry way that ended up in an impasse where they couldn't go forward or back ...

They must have wondered: 'Why this way? Does God know what he is doing?'

God did know what he was doing. We are told God was protecting them from something worse by taking them the long way round – from battles they didn't need to fight, and from themselves.

Some days it feels like we have gone the long way round to in impasse too 'Elsie' (LCA).

Some days I feel like we are getting somewhere and other days I feel like we have been here many times before ... 'circle work' for decades in a wilderness that we can't find a way out of, and now we have ended up in our own impasse ...

I wonder why God has let us go this way ...

- What has he taught us and what have we learnt?
- What has he spared us from that we might not realise?
- Has the enemy always been 'out there' or could we have been our own worst enemy too?
- Have we been too busy complaining to see the wisdom of God's ways with us?

Maybe the long, desert way isn't as bad for us as we make it out to be.

Maybe it has been the way of God, a test of the kind of faith he is looking for in us after all ...

2. They 'took the bones of Joseph with them' (vv18–19).

They carried with them the bones of Joseph. Joseph had commanded them on the day God would save them to take his mummified body with them all the way to the Promised Land. A reminder of their salvation, and of God's promises.

We don't carry the bones or bodies of Joseph or of past LCA presidents and bishops with us today ...

We do travel together with the body and blood of Jesus, at his command, and we travel together as his body. The body of the living Jesus who is:

- our assurance of God's forgiveness and freedom,
- our assurance of God's saving presence and help, and
- our assurance of God's promised future ahead.

We rediscover who we are and where we are going by his presence with and within us today.

3. God acted as their 'GPS'.

No, not a 'GPC' – a General Pastors Conference is helpful for advice but not always reliable and not infallible. Our GPC doesn't always agree with itself which way the LCA should go! No, Israel had a 'GPS' – God Positioned himSelf in front of them as they journeyed.

'By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people' (vv21–2).

God himself led the way, towering in front of them in cloud and fire so they could travel constantly and safely, even into the night. There was no stopping God and his people following behind him ...

'Elsie' (LCA) I know we have come here with our Strategic Plan and our Reconciliation Action Plan (and if honest our own personal plans too!) We think we've got our restructure right, Professional Standards for safety, and Communications to tell the world who we are, but it's God himself who we look to for our direction, our security and our identity. That's why we begin our daily journey as Synod in his presence.

Do you see God out the front today 'Elsie' (LCA)?

I don't see cloud and fire in here, but if we lower our eyes we can see a Bible – God leading us in his word, the word that he told us today 'is a light shining in a dark place ...' (2 Peter 1:19). And we heard the promise in it today that if we follow Jesus who called himself the 'Light of the World' we will 'never walk in darkness ...' (John 8:12).

And if we look we can see God positioning himself on the altar – the body and blood of Christ hidden in the cloud of bread and wine.

God has Positioned himSelf, our 'GPS' right here in front of us, among us, and even within us.

'Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.'

Neither the word of God nor his presence in water, bread and wine ever leaves us either ...

So, where are we going today 'Elsie' (LCA), and who are we along the way?

- I don't know where we are going this side of heaven, and
- Who are we anyway that God should have bothered with us, saved us brought us together?
- Who are we that God has stayed with us and keeps on forgiving us?
- Who are we that God has loved and blessed us along the way like he has 'Elsie' (LCA)?
- Who are we that he keeps on holding out his promises to us?

We don't determine who we are and where we are going as much as we like to think.

It's not about who we are and where we are going at all.

It's about who God is and where God is going.

So we go into the unknown today with the God we do know:

- who has freed us and brought and kept us together in the past
- who is always with us and one step ahead of us at the same time
- who is unstoppable and who calls us to get in behind him and where he is going!
- who leads his people in paths we would never choose for ourselves.
- The God we know in Jesus, whose living body we are and whose crucified and risen body we are about to receive again and take with us into the day.

So 'Elsie' (LCA), as we set out today,

- let's remember who, and where God is,
- and let him determine where we are going,
and who we are along the way ...