

13 January 2008

'The Church: Guided and Guarded by God'

Exodus 13:17-18, 20-22, Acts 15:1-29

June 1940 was a tense time in Britain. The Nazi war machine had rampaged through Europe and was now poised just a few miles across the English Channel. Invasion seemed inevitable.

And so Britain took precautions. Barriers were placed across the main roads, and concrete pill boxes built in strategic places, some of them disguised as chalets, tea stalls, or even haystacks. Scaffolding and concrete blocks covered beaches, and piers were cut off from the shore. To prevent troop gliders from landing, open spaces, downs and golf courses were strewn with obstacles such as old cars and buses, carts, even iron bedsteads. Old canal barges were floated on reservoirs to prevent landings by sea and float planes.

But the precaution which everybody remembers today – and which probably caused more confusion than anything else – was the decision to take down or paint out all the signposts on roads and nameboards on railway stations. You could still travel (although it wasn't easy) – but you had no way of knowing when you had arrived. And asking for directions laid you open to the danger of being taken for an enemy spy. So every journey into unknown territory became an expedition of faith. It must have been a tremendous relief, as well as a huge morale-booster, when the signs were re-erected in July 1943, after the threat of invasion had passed.

God's people are people on a journey of faith; and, even though it is unlikely that we will be asked to physically move from one place to another, we still need God to direct our pilgrimage. That is true for individuals, who sometimes have to make difficult and life-changing decisions; it is also true for churches, who have to decide the ways in which God is leading their life, their mission and their Christian service. Marking time is not an option for any Christian community: our God is a living and dynamic God who wants to show his people how they should face the challenge of living and serving in a world which often seems to be changing with bewildering speed.

So how does a church discover what God is saying to it? That is surely a crucial question for us, both as we look back on 150 years of worship and activity in these buildings, and as we move forward into this new year of 2008. Of course, in the past, God's guidance seemed to be such a clear and simple thing. When the Hebrew slaves left Egypt, they were led by a column of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. And so everything was very simple. When the smoke and flame moved, they moved. When the smoke and flame stayed still, they pitched camp. True, the Israelites had no idea about God's timescale, and so they had to be on their toes, ready to move on at a moment's notice. But they did know their ultimate destination and, in the meantime, they could take comfort from these very tangible – if rather frightening – evidences of God's presence among them.

For the Church today, guidance does not come so easily. Even if we do believe that God speaks to his people, we find it very hard to discern his voice. Many people speak out, both within the churches and outside, saying, "If only you do this or that, then you will be blessed and successful" - unfortunately, some of those voices are giving counsel which utterly contradicts other peoples' advice. In confusion, the church gives up and says, "We simply can't find out if God is saying anything to us at all. We'll just keep on doing what we have always done". That, of course, is the proven recipe for safety, stagnation and ultimate death.

So how does God speak to guide his people today? Obviously we believe that he can speak through Scripture, by his Holy Spirit - but his voice is always mediated by fallible and mortal human beings. And in our church's tradition we don't believe that any one person, whether that be the Minister or even the Moderator of General Assembly, who has a monopoly on bringing God's message to his people: rather,

we meet together in Church Meeting with the hope that we may hear one person or another saying, "I believe this is the way in which God is leading us". It is then our collective responsibility to decide whether, in fact, they are right, whether they have latched on to God's voice or not.

A couple of months ago I wrote an article in "Comment" about church meetings, in which I called them one of the glories of our tradition - and I wasn't joking when I said that, even though I am well aware that church meetings have a bad name in many churches as being irrelevant, petty and boring. Sadly, I received virtually no feedback to what I had written; and my article didn't seem to have had any effect on the attendance at the next church meeting, either. And the reason for that is, I think, that we have lost the idea of what the church meeting is supposed to be. It has become a business meeting, a place for receiving reports, a dry and dusty experience to be endured rather than enjoyed. Yet what it should be is the church family meeting together in rich fellowship, intent on hearing the voice of God.

It is not my intention this morning to repeat what I wrote back in the autumn. (I have printed off some copies if you wish to re-read it). But there are a few points about finding God's way through church meeting that I feel I must emphasise or underline.

The first point is that this should be a lively and invigorating time of fellowship. Surely that must follow, if we say we are meeting together in the presence of the living God, and expecting his dynamic Spirit to blow through us? Yet, as we all know, the reality of church meetings can be very different. Somehow we have to snap ourselves out of the spiral of dry routine business and return to the original context of urgently seeking to hear what God may want to say to us. Decency and order can be good things, and I certainly do not like disorganised or rowdy meetings. But they are not good if they end up imprisoning God in a strait-jacket from which he cannot break free.

The second point is that a church meeting should be a place where the church gathers to make real decisions about broad matters of strategy. Let me unpack that a bit. We appoint deacons in the church to make executive decisions and also to think and pray about the direction in which the church should be heading. That is a right and proper thing to do. We also have various committees which take care of a lot of the ongoing detailed planning of what we do. That is also right. But the big policy decisions are not made by the deacons or in committees - that would be totally wrong and improper. Those discussions are for the whole church to take together, in church meeting. For it is the ultimate governing body of our congregation.

The third point I want to make is that, although I richly value the contribution that everyone can make in church meeting (and it doesn't matter whether you've been worshipping here for four months or forty years, your voice can and should be heard), church meeting is not merely a place where people can express their opinions. It is not a democracy but a theocracy: we are not gathered to discover the will of the majority but to hear the voice of God. Do not misunderstand me: I want people to speak in church meetings, far more than they do at present. But I also want them to think and say, "Might my words be God's words, or am I simply stating my own personal preferences?" You might feel diffident speaking out, not sure if what you are saying corresponds to God's will; well, that's fine, the meeting will evaluate what you have said. What we don't want to hear are people simply saying, "I like doing things this way". It is vital that people speak; but they must prayerfully weigh their words first.

The final thing I want to say is that, if you are a regular worshipping member of this congregation and feel that it is your spiritual home, then you should become a church member and come to church meetings. For these meetings are not a refuge for what might be called the core members of the church, the people who are really interested: they are an opportunity for everyone to get involved. Too often many people in churches say, "I was never consulted" or "I never knew about that" or "I don't feel part of the decision-making process". Well, there is a simple answer to that: they need to make the effort, to participate in church meetings, rather than letting everyone else take the strain. This church belongs to all of us - which means that it is our responsibility, too.

As you all know, we are rapidly approaching the 150th anniversary of this church building. But I must say that the living stones of the church - by which I mean you and me - are far more important to God than the stones, bricks and mortar which merely form a convenient venue for us to do our work and worship

for God. After all, the early churches never had any physical buildings at all - yet they certainly did great things for God! Furthermore (and I know that I am sadly mixing up my metaphors), the living stones of the Church are bound together by the Spirit's mortar into a pilgrim people which never stays stationary in its understanding of God and his mission to the world.

And so I'd like to finish my message today with three challenges.

The first is to those people who feel that they really are part of this church yet who have never committed themselves to it in formal membership. May I say to you, "Please take that step". You don't have to be a super-saint to join; but by doing so you are saying to yourself, to the rest of us, and above all to God: "This church is where I belong. These are the people I am committed to. So I want to play my part".

The second is to those people who are church members but who never come to church meetings. Now, I appreciate that some people do lead busy lives, with many commitments; it may not be easy squeezing something else in. I also appreciate that some folk may have other practical difficulties in taking part. Nevertheless, to you may I simply say, "When you joined, you said before this congregation that you would take your responsibilities to it seriously". You may well give generously, worship faithfully, and pray for the church regularly, which are all wonderful things to do. But we need you to play your part in listening for God. If you don't, we may miss hearing his voice and finding his way. What a shame that would be!

And the final challenge is to us all, which is simply to believe that, more than 3000 years after Moses and nearly 2000 years after the New Testament, God still leads, guides and cares for his church. The fact that God deigns to communicate with us at all may well seem little short of miraculous; yet it is something that we believe can happen on a regular basis. True, finding God's will can sometimes be confusing, although it should never be boring. But I believe - as do Baptist and Congregational Christians around Britain and further afield - that God speaks to us through prayerful, listening fellowship.

And we, the people known as Christ Church, certainly do need to receive words from God to guide us into our future. As we celebrate the anniversary of this building, we know that the town around this place is vastly different to what it was in 1858 - after all, that was still early in Victoria's reign. We have electric light now instead of gas, cars instead of carts and carriages; more importantly, the houses which once clustered around this church have long gone, the town centre is migrating westwards, and the University is growing almost on our doorstep. The country has gone through two world wars, not to mention economic boom and bust; the Christian religious consensus which prevailed 150 years ago has largely disappeared.

So how will we best use these premises for the future? How will we do our mission and outreach into the community? What new avenues of service might God be asking us to enter? (And, equally, what cherished traditions might he be asking us to leave behind?) At the moment I don't know the answer to those questions, and nor do you. But I do know that we have a divine responsibility to find out - from the God who still guides his pilgrim people today.