

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
Sunday 10 March, 2013
BAPTISM TOBY JOSHUA KEAN
Joshua 3: 14- 4:9, 1 Corinthians 15: 3-11
Rev. Anneke Oppewal



REFLECTION: "Crossing the River"

Today is the day Toby Joshua Kean has become part of the Church. It is a memorable day, because it is the day where his family has suddenly grown to include billions more than his father and mother, his grandparents, his aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, cousins, and any other family or friends he may be related to. According to Wikipedia, at this moment, worldwide, Christianity has about 2.2 billion adherents, and all of those are now brothers and sisters of Toby's.

That's quite scary, isn't it? Especially because most of those 2.2 billion are people we don't know, and never will know. And not only that, not all of those 2.2 billion are what we would regard as particularly good Christians, or even nice people we would want to hang out with on a warm Sunday morning. And yet. All these people, all these 2.2 billion, regard themselves as in some way connected to the story of Jesus and recognise him as a figure that is important to them. They all know, more or less, of his story. And although how some of them interpret and appropriate that story for their lives may seem pretty wacky to some of us, and even though there are some pretty awful sinners among them, they are still, want it or not, part of that huge family called Christianity.

It has been that way since the birth of the Christian community. From the very first, when a group of first century fishermen started to tell of their experiences with a Jewish Rabbi called Jesus in the first century CE. From the start there were differences in how they told the story, how they interpreted it, how they applied it to their lives and how they incorporated it into the thinking of their days. But they all agreed on one thing: The story of this Jesus, this Joshua, was important enough to share, and in some cases even to suffer for, because of the difference it made to their lives.

The apostle Paul, part of whose letter to his friends in Corinth we read this morning, a guy who never knew Jesus, but heard the story from others, says it beautifully: 'For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received'. And then, a little bit further on: 'Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me'. Paul, in other words, is someone who has handed on what he has received from others. But not only that, the words, the stories, have come alive for him through the experience of something more substantial than just the shared memories of others can ever be: An encounter with the living Christ, an experience of the living presence of Jesus in his life. Something clicked for Paul. And many of those 2.2 billion Christians today are still claiming that something has clicked in that same way for them. That the story of Jesus is not 'just' story to them, but a living, life-changing reality. A living changing reality that makes a difference in the way they think, feel, and conduct their lives. How is that possible?

With all these people, somewhere along the line, someone shared the story of Jesus, and what it meant to them. It may have been in simple straightforward easy to understand terms, or it may have been with a lot of depth and insight in the story behind the story. It may have been shared with enthusiasm, with joy, or in dour tones or with dire exhortations. But the story was shared and all, or part of it stuck. That however is only half of the story. That's the part where, in the story about Joshua and his people crossing the

Jordan, parents and grandparents, other family and friends, take their children, their family members, their friends, or guests, or even strangers, to Gilgal to see these funny stones that are standing there, to tell them the story of how their people came to the land after spending a long time in the wilderness, and how they crossed the river to a totally different place, and knew that God was with them, because it was made miraculously easy for them to cross that river and get to the other side. If it stopped there, the people receiving the story would go: 'O, great story.... and how long ago was this?' And they may even, when they pass the stones at another time with a friend or relative, repeat the story and talk about the coming of the people to the land, and that there was a miraculous crossing from the wilderness into the land and how the people decided to pile up a couple of stones so everyone would remember. And year after year, century after century, the story would be repeated and people would remember, generation after generation why those funny stones were there, at Gilgal offering an opportunity to share about some of the history of the people living around them. I am sure many of those 2.2 billion Christians all over the world repeat the stories from the Bible, day after day, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, generation after generation, in that way. And some may think that's what it is all about. To hand on the story, the tradition, and make sure the next generation hears about it, and will, in their turn, hand the story on. So it won't be lost.

That however, is *not* all, it is only half the job done. Because these stories are not just stories. They are no fairytales, no moral discourse, no philosophy, no history. Or rather: they are, but they are something else as well. They are stories that tell of a reality beyond the story, stretching out beyond, before, after, around, below and above it to give access to an experience that goes a lot deeper than sharing memories, or remembering past history. For people of faith they are stories that offer access to the experience, the living reality, of God. There are no words for that, and no direct way of conveying that experience, other than by pointing to it through story. Every person has to find his or her own way into it. Into the mystery these stories invite you to connect to. A mystery that, once you have connected to it, will change your life and the way you see the world around you. A mystery that will touch your soul and change your heart and bring something to your life that is different from the everyday. Something inspiring, nurturing, caring, supporting, bringing joy and peace, strength and endurance. The stories we tell in our Christian community point to that mystery, that experience of something 'other', that inspiration, that source of joy and peace and wholeness, and to the way others have connected and experienced it over the centuries. And in that way they are essential to our faith. Should we stop telling the stories, we, and the people after us, will lose their pointers to a reality, a presence, a possible connection that has sustained and supported generations before us. But they are not the experience, not the mystery itself, they are pointers, connectors, opportunities to engage with the reality of the mystery behind them.

Let me try to show you how that works with what we read from those stories this morning: There once was a people lost in the wilderness who found themselves on the banks of a river, unable to cross to the other side. And somehow, something, was there and helped them to find their way to a place where life was much better than it had been before. The name of their leader at that time was Joshua, saviour. That was his life's program you see, to save his people. And he did, and whenever you find yourself in the wilderness, facing a river that is difficult to cross, you may think of this Joshua and his people, and see if there is someone around who may have a similar program to his life. Or you may hope that somehow what seemed too hard will prove to be much easier than you thought, because help may come from unexpected quarters.

There once was a man, he ended up in a wilderness of his own. He loved people and helped them, and they loved him. But there were others who didn't like it, who started to hate him and wanted to kill him. The name of that man was also Joshua, or Jesus, which comes from the same root. He was born to help, to heal, to save others, but he found himself in a wilderness of jealousy and hatred and was killed. You'd think the story would have finished there, but it didn't. Somehow he didn't drown in the river of death, he made it to the other side and lived to tell the tale. His friends handed on his story, and then those they handed the story on to, handed it on again, and again. And it is still going that chain, until the present day. But not only that, if you listen carefully, if you open yourself, you'll discover he still lives, His Spirit is still around, helping, saving, healing. Especially when you find yourself in the wilderness with a few rivers to cross, especially when you feel you are drowning in hardship, but also when the going is easy, and you've got time to celebrate all the wonderful miracles you meet every day on your journey through life and feel someone, something, right beside you, sharing your life and enriching it. Amen.