

EXODUS 31  
PEOPLE WITH GOD AT THE CENTRE

A man was walking past the quarry where some men were working; there were four of them cutting stone from the quarry and working hard at it! The man was fascinated by what they were doing so he went into the quarry to talk to them about what they were doing:

The first man described his job; he was cutting a stone. He talked about what he was working on, shaping the stone into a regular shape and that was his job; this is what he was supposed to do when he came to work every morning and if he didn't do his job he would get into trouble.

The second man described what he was doing as making money. He saw that at the end of the day he would get paid for what he did and that was the most important thing to him; he was also cutting a stone, but he saw this as a way of making money to buy food and clothes, and to keep his family.

The third man said he was making a cathedral. He saw more than just the stone; he knew where the stone was going and that it would become part of this great building that would stand for years in the centre of the city and people would admire it and say 'what a wonderful building; I wonder who built it?'

The fourth man said that he was serving God and giving glory to God. He saw that his talent for cutting stone was a talent that God had given him and he wanted to use that talent to honour God. By using his talent to cut stone and doing that very well, he was saying 'thank you' to God for giving him the talent and was showing other people how good and great God is.

All four men were doing the same job; they were all cutting stone into regular shapes from rough chunks in the quarry, but they saw job in different ways. For some it was just a job, a way of using tools, cutting stone; for others it was all about the money they could make by doing this job; another saw that this is more than just a job, being part of some great building project; finally, the last man saw that what he did would honour God. Some of the people working on the huge cathedrals that adorn our cities saw their work as giving glory to God and we admire their craftsmanship; but the fascinating thing is that some of the most ornate work is in places we cannot see, but is hidden away; we might think that these places would be where we'd find shoddy workmanship, but these are places where craftsmen did good work because their work for the glory of God. God sees and they don't care if no-one else does!

"The Lord's work done in the Lord's way!" Be a people with God at the centre! What does that look like in our time, in our culture, in our Church? There are battles going on all over the place: there is a battle for the place of God and religion in 21st century Scottish culture, a battle that is to be seen in Parliament, Councils, newspapers, with vocal secular groups wanting to remove God from the public square. It is a battle going on in the Church: what does it mean to be a Church with Jesus at the centre and there are at least two kinds of answer to that question; which will prevail? It is a daily battle in the heart and mind of the Christian, because part of us says "yes" to God and to live by faith and to look to put faith into practice in the kind of people we are, but there is also part of us that wants to rebel and go our own way and live by the standards and values of "everybody else" rather than the standards and values of Jesus when God is King! What does it mean to be people with God at the centre?

Exodus 31 has two little cameo examples of a people learning to have God at the centre of their lives. The people are travelling in the desert, towards the Promised Land; God is with them, guiding and leading them on their journey, the pillar of cloud during the day and the pillar of fire at night and when the cloud moved, they moved. They are also establishing community life: this is a time of great change for Israel; not

so very long ago they were slaves and life was determined by their slave masters; they had no freedom to choose; now they are free people, but “how do we live as a community? What are our values? What are our priorities? Where do the boundaries lie?” We saw last week that God gave them priorities and boundaries in the ten commandments and they are now trying to work out what it means to love God and love their neighbour. These two little cameos in chapter 31 show us what it is like to be a people with God at the centre.

Bezalel and Oholiab: this is the only place they appear in the story, but it really is quite profound. Of Bezalel God says *“I have...”* (Exodus 31:3) Oholiab is his assistant. The tabernacle was the cathedral of its day, the place where the people would meet with God; it was a mobile place of worship, the tent Israel would take with them all through the desert and it was placed at the centre of the camp and the place where they would meet with God day after day. There are detailed instructions for its building and now here are the people who will build it and who will make the garments for Aaron and the others, the leaders of worship. The skills and abilities that they have to do this work are God-given skills and abilities, and the Spirit of God is in them to help them use these gifts and skills for the glory of God. *“I have...”* (Exodus 31:6) Their skills and abilities are to be used in the way that God has commanded, in a spirit of obedience, guided and led by God. So, God is there when the draughtsman’s drawings are being made, when the wood is being carved; God is inspiring the weavers, the smiths, the needleworkers, the chemists and the rest. (par Motyer) The Spirit is at work to inspire these people to use their gifts and skills with this attitude of obedience and to give glory to God. Here are people going to work in a way that has God at the centre of their lives, their work, their attitudes; they are doing everything for the glory of God.

The Spirit is at work in the church and the world. How do you think He goes about His business? The Spirit is at work in more ways than we understand. We could make a case for saying that all the gifts and skills and abilities that we have are God-given, as part of the unique person that God has made us. So we use these gifts, skills, abilities to honour God. Some say “I have no gifts!” but look at the list of gifts that the Spirit gave in Exodus 31 and see that this list is much longer than you might imagine. Can you sew, knit, hammer in a nail, saw wood, design a building and make plans, work out a page of figures and handle money, teach children, cook, clean floors, treat someone’s medical condition, listen to someone’s troubled life-story, play music, preach a sermon – by the Bible’s understanding these are all gifts, skills and abilities that are God-given; how do we use these gifts and skills and abilities, and the ones that I’ve not mentioned, to honour God?

The Sabbath: how to organise your weekly schedule in a way that puts God at the centre? These men working on the Tabernacle are reminded, and the whole people reminded, that they need a day of rest. *“You must...”* (Exodus 31:13) *“For six...”* (Exodus 31:15a) *“It will...”* (Exodus 31:17) The rhythm of work and rest is built in to the way the world works. God’s work of creation was done in 6 days according to the picture in Genesis 1, and then God rested. Human beings are made in the same way: we are made to work, but needing to rest. For Israel that rhythm of work and rest was given shape by the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, the day when no work was to be done, the day of rest. The Sabbath was to be a sign to the people that God is Lord and that God is holy, a sign of God’s presence and a sign of people’s determination to live in the Lord’s way. It was never meant to be what it later became, a set of chains to shackle people; Jesus had to throw off these shackles again and, as Lord of Sabbath, help people to see that it stands for life with God at the centre.

How do we organise our weekly schedule in way that puts God at the centre? The most obvious way might seem to want to recover Sunday in a way that it used to be observed 50 years ago. But where does that leave people for whom Sunday now is a working day and they have no choice in that matter? We are compulsive workers; both the French revolution and Stalin's Russia tried to do away with the rhythm of work and rest, but both discovered that it didn't work; people could not go on working for ten days on end without rest; they discovered that the six-day pattern is the one that best suits our human capacities. It is not a case of "keep the Sabbath", but that we recognise that people need rest from work and if not Sunday, then another day of the week. Sunday does act as a sign for us that God is still there and that God should be the centre of our lives, a sign that God still loves us and that God is still Lord of our lives. The big question for us to work out is how to organise our weekly schedule in way that puts God at the centre?

This is not only a question about the weekly schedule; it is a question about the whole of life. Life is made up of all sorts of bits: family life is a huge part of life for many people, with its joy as well as stress; family can mean all sorts of responsibilities – parents looking after children; children looking after parents; grandparents and grandchildren etc. Work we've already mentioned and for some people work can be hugely demanding and stressful; we use the skills and abilities we have to do a job, to make money, or to make other people's lives better, but do we also use them for the glory of God? We can add whole lot of other things: school, university, leisure and retirement, our attitude to money, wealth and possessions – how do we put God at the centre of all of that?

We have to want to put God at the centre of life! Jesus came teaching the values and standards of life when God is king. We read these and admire them; we see their value and we see how much good these words have done in the world, how much good insight Jesus has given us. But admiring them from a distance is not why Jesus gave these words; Jesus gave us these words so that we would put them into practice. He told the story about the wise and foolish builders and we sometimes sing the song; the key to that story is: *"everyone who..."* (Mt 7:24, 26) We have to want to shape life with God at the centre and be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be; this is not something that happens automatically or by accident and it is not something that happens easily, but setting God at the centre of life is for our good, for the good of our society, for the good of the world.

Scotland stands at something of a crossroads at the moment in all sorts of ways. There are changes to our culture, to our political life and there are changes in the church that make us feel uneasy. The challenge for us as Christians is to persevere in faith, to keep believing and to keep living in the way that we think is important. How do we live as a people with God at centre? In some ways you have to answer that question for yourself, for your own life. We will not always get it right, but one thing I do know – it matters hugely. How do we live as a people with God at the centre?