

EXODUS 5:1-6:12
BRICKS WITHOUT STRAWS

“A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way.” Mark Twain was famous for lots of quotable quotes, quips, and homespun wisdom like this one. I’m not advocating this, by the way, because it is probably deemed as cruel to cats, so please accept it in the spirit in which it is meant. It is all about how we learn things about life: we will read a book about cats and the book will tell us that cats have sharp teeth and dangerous claws; we can listen to other people’s stories about cats and how they were scratched by cats and they will tell us that “cats are dangerous if you treat them in the wrong way”. We learn all of that and compute it; someone else has done this before us and they warn us of what it might be like. But it is only when we experience it for ourselves that we learn; there are things that we learn about cats only when we carry a cat by the tail; we learn just what the experience is like and how we react to that kind of noise, the hissing, and scratching sound and the fury that is a cat when it is angry! You can’t learn that in any other way. Twain is probably right.

There are things about life and being a Christian that we can learn only by experience. If someone were to ask you “what is it like to be a Christian?” I wonder how you would answer. Would you paint a rosy picture, painting the Christian life and faith in the best possible light? That’s our instinct, especially if we’re trying to persuade someone to become a Christian; we’re going to tell them all the good parts of it and how much blessing from God comes to us through our Christian faith; we will tell them how life is complete, full of meaning in a new way when Jesus is at the centre and Christian faith shapes the way in which we think and live. But here’s a thing: anyone who writes about the Christian faith and life as a personal experience honestly will tell you that there are times when it is hard and a struggle; they will tell you that they have learned things about themselves and about God that they had never known before. If we tell people that the Christian life is brilliant and wonderful and fantastic all of the time, and when they encounter struggles and difficulties, they are perfectly entitled to come back and say “Why didn’t you warn me?” There are things we learn about God, ourselves, life, Christian faith, only by experience, not from books, not even the Bible, not from other people, not even preachers! God walks with us.

Moses learned things about God and other people, about life, faith and himself; he learned things by experience that he could have learned in no other way. The story so far: the Hebrew people are slaves in Egypt and are being mistreated; Pharaoh is afraid that they will be an enemy within his gates and so he has made them his slaves and has been killing the Hebrew sons. Moses escaped this killing and grew up as an adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter. His Hebrew mother would tell him the stories of their faith and when he grew up his instinct told him that he belonged with these slave people. He tried to exercise leadership, but it backfired and he ran away, a wanted man by Pharaoh and his people antagonized and suspicious. 40 years later, he has an encounter with God in the burning bush. God has heard the cries of His people; they long to be rescued and He has heard their prayers, He knows their situation and His answer – to send Moses. Moses gave God five reasons why this is a bad idea, but he goes; he meets his brother Aaron; and the elders of Israel are excited that God has come to rescue His people.

Full of hope and expectation, Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh: “*This is...*” (*Exodus 5:1*) This is the key request; this is what they want Pharaoh to do for them, to let the people take a three-day trip into the desert for a pilgrimage festival. This is not an unusual

request, other people did the same kind of thing and we have to take the request at face value; this is what they wanted to do as a first step to the next request which would be their freedom. Is Moses testing the waters? This is what God told him to say and he may have over-egged pudding a bit, but Moses is here doing the will of God with expectation that this will work and that the people will be free to go. His hope and expectation has rubbed off on his people: the elders of Israel are glad that Moses is here and that finally God will act on their behalf in answer to their prayers. It is all over bar the shouting, surely! All that will be left to do is pack their bags; they're on their way!

But they've not taken Pharaoh into account! He has two reactions that destroy their hope almost completely. First of all, "*Who is...*" (*Exodus 5:2*) This is not a question looking for an answer. He is not looking for information so that he can believe. He refuses even to acknowledge God; it is a sneer that says "I will not take any notice of your God; I will pay no attention to anything that your God might want. No!" Secondly, he accused the Hebrews of being lazy; they have too much time on their hands if have time to want three days off to go into desert on pilgrimage. He decides to make their life even harder: they are making bricks out of mud, and these bricks are held together with straw; the straw was chopped up and mixed with the clay as a binding agent, to make the bricks stronger. So, they are to make the same number of bricks, but the straw will no longer be provided; "you will have to find your own straw and still make the same number of bricks!" Their situation just got a whole lot worse – bricks without straw! What did Moses expect? God had hinted that it would not be easy; hard-hearted Pharaoh just got even harder-hearted and Moses' task just got even more difficult. All hope and expectation of success is blown away.

I've had several conversations of late with friends in ministry. They are fairly young in ministry, new-ish to the jobs to which God and their congregations have called them. They have been excited about ministry and the prospect of fulfilling their sense of calling from God and serving Him in this new way. They have come at it full of hope and expectation that God will be at work in their new ministries. Indeed, God is at work in and through these ministries, there is no doubt about that. But my young friends have discovered another side to serving the Lord and that is – it can be hard! As well as hopes and expectations, there are hurts and disappointments; as well as joys and blessings there are troubles and struggles. No matter how much other people have prepared them for this reality, when they have discovered it for themselves, it hurts; it's hard.

As this is true of ministry, the same is true of Christian life in general. When we set out on Christian faith, everything is new and exciting; we know that we have a lot to learn, but read the Bible with enthusiasm, we listen well to sermons and even make notes on what the preacher says. Life and faith are full of joys and delights; God is indeed blessing us through our faith. But then there is another side to life and faith and sometimes it is hard; sometimes it is a struggle. No matter how much we're prepared for that, we only learn what it is really like when it happens. There are doubts and disappointments; there are trials and tribulations; there are times when that faith is stretched to the limit. We discover that we are, what Paul calls, jars of clay, fallible, weak people: hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. We're not always sure how to deal with that. We see Moses deal with it and learn from him!

Jesus said that the two most important things in life are to love God and to love other people. It is strange then, that when things get hard, these are the two loves that are

most under pressure, that are most stretched by our struggles. It was certainly true for Moses:

First, his love for God is stretched: "*Moses returned...*" (*Exodus 5:22f*) There's a kind of "I told you so" about this prayer, this complaint. "I told you that it wouldn't work; all I've done is to make things worse for these people; is this why you brought me here? By the way, you've not done what you said you would do!" There is a real sense of disappointment and even despair in Moses' voice as he prays and tries to work out what God is doing. His relationship with God is being stretched by what has happened. Secondly, his relationships with his friends are being stretched: "*May the...*" (*Exodus 5:21*) It's not the most cordial of greetings! All the hope and delight of their first meeting is gone and has been replaced by bitter recriminations and blame; "it's all your fault; life was bad enough before you came; all you have done is make things a hundred times worse!"

That seems to be the way life is; when things are hard for us, we blame God; our faith is put to the test and our relationship with God is stretched sometimes almost to breaking point. People walk away from God when life is tough; somehow it seems to us in these times that His love is not strong enough to sustain us when we're struggling. These are the times when we find it hardest to pray or when our prayers are all complaint and anger. Our relationships with other people are most strained then too; even people we love dearly get hurt at times by our reactions to difficult times and it takes patience and perseverance to make sure that these relationships survive these tough times. Moses had to rebuild his relationships with Israel; he did so with God's help, though that relationship was always a touch uneasy and, as we shall see, it would not take much to throw it off balance.

"*Moses...*" (*Exodus 5:22; 6:1*) Let's not run away from God; Moses went back to God, yes, with complaint and God heard and listened. How was that relationship rebuilt? By God reminding Moses of what God is like. It is a heat of the moment complaint: "*You have...*" (*Exodus 5:23b*) God says "I am" and "I will" "Moses, remember who I am; remember that I am God." Seven times he says "I will" and in the first part of chapter 6, God repeats all the promises that He had made before, reminding Moses that God has promised to rescue His people and that God has promised to take them to the Promised Land. The grace and patience of God will mend that relationship. "*We have...*" (*2 Corinthians 4:7f*) Paul knew that life could be hard and that faith could be a struggle and I'm sure that there were even times when "bricks without straw" would be the picture of his life, yet he also knew that God's power was enough to support him, sustain him, and strengthen him. The Christians in Corinth are encouraged in the days when their life is hard, encouraged by Paul's faith and his confidence in God, encouraged also by discovering for themselves the grace, patience and faithfulness of God.

I don't know what would count as "bricks without straw" days for you; they will be different for all of us. These are the days when faith is stretched almost to breaking point. These are the days when our love for other people is stretched almost to breaking point. What do we do when these days come along? When hope turns to disappointment, and joy turns to sadness or even despair. Do we run away from God? Do we hurt other people even more? Moses returned to God and discovered that God is patient, faithful and gracious, that God is there even in the 'bricks without straw' moments. He could discover how deep is such faithfulness, grace and patience only when the days are full of 'bricks without straw'! He learned to trust.