

MATTHEW 2:13-23
TRAVELLING LIGHT! TRAVELLING WITH GOD!

The Christmas story is full of travellers! The wise men came travelling, perhaps the longest journey of all, across the Middle East to meet a new king, following some unusual sight in the sky! They went home again a different way, a journey made at least in part secretly so that Herod wouldn't know. The shepherds travelled the shortest distance, from the hills around Bethlehem into the town itself to see a new baby, as they were told by the angels; they went home again rejoicing! Mary and Joseph travelled: at first the 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem by order of the government, to be counted for tax purposes; then later to Egypt as refugees, then finally back to Nazareth, the family coming home to start a new life. There was lots of travelling, a lot of journeys and God is with these people in all of them!

Our world is no different. Lots of people travel at Christmas: some people travel across the world to spend time with family in Australia, USA, or Canada, not to mention driving the length and breadth of the UK to spend time with people they love. People travel to work: there are lots of people in our city who have travelled here to work in Edinburgh from all across the world, in all sorts of jobs; some have done so willingly and freely, some have done so as victims of trafficking and wish they were somewhere else; some travel to work every day, so the M8 is busy and the trains are full. Some people in our world travel as refugees, escaping poverty or danger or oppression or famine; what they want to do, really, is to go home; there are millions of people in refugee camps in Lebanon or Jordan or Bangladesh, larger than most cities in world, people living in tents, afraid or unable to go home. The mood has changed; now some want to stop people travelling and they build a wall or create barriers of other kinds.

We tend to make fun, ever so slightly now, of people who talk about "being on a journey" when they are describing their life. It has been said so often by people who are on television that it has become trite. But the picture is at the heart of the way in which the Bible speaks about us and our relationship with God. "*I am...*" (*John 8:12*) "*The people...*" (*Isaiah 9:2*) to give just two examples. The picture of walking is one that we need to understand; it speaks to us of how we are as disciples of Jesus and how God is with us as His children.

This is a journey of faith. Joseph learned to trust God and listen to God; so he travelled in the Lord's ways, guided by God. I'm not sure he always understood everything, but he travelled in faith, trusting God. What have we learned about God in the last 12 months? Have we learned anything new? Or is our understanding of God the same as it was day we left Sunday School or the Youth Fellowship, or the day we joined the church and professed faith? Have we become parked in a lay-by, travelling no more after these heady days of learning? Faith means the body of truth that we understand, the things that are true that we believe; there is always room for us to know and understand new things and that this body of faith grows as we learn. Faith also means a relationship of trust: children trust their parents in a very simple way, relying on them, depending on them; adults trust in a much more complex way because trust is tested as we grow up, tested by people who let us down, or by the sense that God has let us down; adult trust is much more complex and much more fickle. Learning to trust God more is ideal, but is not always easy. This is a journey of faith.

This is also a journey of being the right kind of people. I came across this quote the other day; does it ring a bell? "...the characteristic of human nature is to love oneself and to consider only one's self. But what else can it do? It cannot help its own love being inconsistent and miserable. It wants to be great and sees that it is only small. It wants to be happy and finds it is wretched. It wants to be perfect and sees itself full of imperfections. It wants to be the object of other people's love and esteem and sees that its faults deserve only their dislike and contempt." There is a sense of realism: this is what we're like; but it is also a dream, an aspiration to be better, to be new people, to be people who have better qualities, and more of these better qualities. We'd describe it as being more like Jesus, walking in the Lord's ways

more, being the right kind of people, doing the right things, learning from Jesus, from the Bible, from the times when we get things wrong. It is a journey of being the right kind of people.

That's all there is to our journey as Christians: it is a journey of faith and it is a journey of being the right kind of people. It is simple. We travel lightly! We make it much more complicated than it needs to be, but these are the two ways in which we are called to walk: to believe and trust and let that faith grow; to be the right kind of people and to become more and more the right kind of people. We started on these paths before, some of us a long time ago, but our calling from Jesus is to keep walking these paths. The danger is we get stuck, stopped in a lay-by somewhere and we never get moving again, distracted by other things. Our challenge for 2020 will be to move along, to keep walking in the Lord's ways, to grow in faith and to become more and more like Jesus in the kind of people we are.

God travels with us! We said that of Joseph's journeys with Mary and Jesus, that everywhere they went, God went with them. Into Egypt when they were afraid, God was there; coming home when they were much more at peace, God was with them; He brought His Son out of Egypt. Here's a way in which to see something of what God is like: *"In all their..." (Isaiah 63:9)* Isaiah tells us three things about God and us: first of all, He shares in our distress when life is tough, and walks the hard road with us; secondly, His love, mercy and grace save us; thirdly, He lifts and carries us. This is what God is like. When we say that God travels with us, and this is what that means. He shares our journey and when that journey is tough, He lifts and carries us. Here's a reading that shares something of that with us:

"One night I had a dream...

I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord, and across the sky flashed scenes from my life.

For each scene I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; One belonged to me, and the other to the Lord.

When the last scene of my life flashed before us, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. I noticed that many times along the path of my life, there was only one set of footprints.

I also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in my life.

This really bothered me, and I questioned the Lord about it.

"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, You would walk with me all the way; but I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why in times when I needed you the most, you should leave me.

The Lord replied, "My precious, precious child. I love you, and I would never, never leave you during your times of trial and suffering.

When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."