



*Sermon: 13 October 2024*

*Rev. Norman Wilkins*

### **Getting ready to arrive - Exodus 13:21**

This reading wasn't one chosen in the lectionary, but it makes the point that it was the right journey for what was required. First of all, having that cloud and fire to follow was right because it would have been all too easy to have got lost in the desert. However, you wouldn't get lost if you were Bedouins who had always lived there, but these people had been city people, slaves in Egypt, a civilised country, so they could so easily have got lost. They needed guidance, so they got it by way of that pillar of cloud and column of fire.

They spent 40 years wandering in the desert, needing to be fed with manna and for Moses to find water for them by striking a rock. It was about 200km from the Red Sea to Israel. 40 years for 200km. That fire by night and cloud by day sure took them on a wander. By the time they arrived, the people in charge would never have known slavery. That journey wasn't just a physical one, but a character forming journey for them. They would not be ready to enter their promised land without that journey of social character formation from slave to desert-hardened Bedouin.

### **The Journey of Life - Mark 10: 17-31**

Now I am going to talk about those three people, all men as it happens, who chose very different journeys of life. I am sure that all three aimed to live as good and useful lives as they could. I think that is rather like the Israelite quest to enter the promised land, or that young man who wanted eternal life who was challenged by Jesus to give up all he had. I am going to use their real names as I do not think I am going to say anything they wouldn't like to hear

The first one is Alistair Wyse. He was my mate at secondary school. It was a traditional English boarding school and we never used Christian names, so he was Wyse.

Incidentally when there was more than one boy with the same surname, say it was Smith, they were known as Smith one and Smith two. There was only one Wyse or Wilkins so we didn't get a numerical suffix.

However, I am not happy with that naming tradition, as I wasn't really that happy with other things about my education. So I will speak of him as Alistair. Alistair came from Peru. We didn't talk about family background. Actually I can't remember what we talked about, but I did establish that his family was very well off and owned some sort of plantation over there. I suspect Alistair didn't like school either.

Alistair was very good at maths. He would nearly always beat me and come out top of the class at maths. Alistair took his teenage Christian faith very seriously. We had both been confirmed by the Bishop of Bath and Wells in the college chapel. Being confirmed, we were eligible to take communion. The chaplain, who was instrumental in sowing the seeds of my faith, though he would never have known it (but that's another story), held communion services before breakfast every morning and Alistair felt he had to go, and being his friend, I would reluctantly drag myself out of bed to keep him company. I didn't get anything out of it, spiritually, but he was my friend so I went along.

I did not keep in contact with Alistair after leaving school. Some years after leaving I was at university in London and just happened to meet Alistair walking along some street. Alistair had always been a scruffy fellow, but he had really let himself go. He told me he was doing as Jesus required and had given up everything he had and was literally living rough with the homeless of London. He hadn't returned to Peru, and whatever he would have had there. That's the last time I saw Alistair.

The second man is Graham. Now it is possible that some of you will have known Graham. Graham actually was another scruffy man.

He attended our last church of St. Andrew's on the Terrace in Wellington. When I retired and Linda and I moved to Petone we wondered what church we would attend. I spent the first few months of retirement working on our new house, but then came time to get back into church life. We gave St. Andrews a try, largely because I had trained with their minister who was then Margaret Mayman.

I remember walking in and looking around the congregation. I noticed two guys, one sitting down the back on the right and another sitting on the left towards the front.

It will sound as if I have a thing for scruffy guys, but I noticed these two who were definitely not all decked up in Sunday best and thought that if you can be like that and come to this church and still feel accepted and comfortable then this church could be right for me. It was. Anyway, Graham was the man up the front. Graham was another clever man, but in a different way than Alistair. He had a degree in something. He was an advocate for beneficiaries. I don't know if he was paid in his job or did it voluntarily. I guess he was paid, but he knew the law and people's entitlements really well, and he made certain that beneficiaries got their full entitlement out of WINZ.

He had an enormous social conscience and just seemed to live to do all he could for whoever it was who was downtrodden or being hurt in any way. He was admired by all of us in the congregation. I say "was" because a year or so ago he died suddenly. He was really a saint amongst us.

The third man was very different and definitely not scruffy. He was one of my friends at university. He was Greek and he had a very long name, and we just knew him as a shortened version of his surname, Mavro. I will stick with calling him Mavro; somehow that seems better for him than his Christian name Anthony.

Mavro had a MG TC and though being Greek, he fitted the image of the typical upper class English young gentleman.

Mavro was a fun man to be around, and I remember some of that fun we had more than the content of the degree we were doing.

We are still in contact with Mavro and stayed with him and his wife a few years ago. Like me, he changed careers but he became an airline pilot. He retired and he and his wife, Bunny, live in a lovely cottage in an English village. I remember sitting chatting in this olde world cottage watching his autonomous vacuum cleaner wandering around the room while we chatted and drank our wine.

He still had his lovely old MG. It was stored in an outhouse and Linda got to sit in it. Mavro however, is also achieving what is good in the way that presumably he considered right for him. He is on his parish vestry and the local council. He said in a way that hinted at his typical understatement, that he fixed the potholes in the local roads. He is the closest we know to the “upstairs” people in the drama Downton Abbey.

I could say that it may be that Alistair wasted his life. I don't know what happened. Graham certainly gave his life to serve the poor. Does Mavro just live a life of privileged self-indulgence? That doesn't sound like the Mavro I knew.

Who am I to judge? I can't and I won't. To me they are three very different but good men whom I believe aimed to make what they understood to be the kingdom of God a reality around them. Different people in different situations follow different journeys of life.

Sometimes literally following a direction like Alistair did, may not be right for us and can lead us to the wrong destination. Soon after moving here, I was following GPS instructions to find my way home from town on my bike and the GPS lady said turn left, so I did and soon found myself under a washing line looking up at a startled woman looking out of her window at me.

I expect the instructions were correct. I did need to make a left turn, but not for me at exactly that moment in my journey.

With that one reading from the Gospel, I have just focused on this one occasion when Jesus perceives what someone needs. There are many different occasions that require a different journey.

A crippled man needs to be told to stand up and walk. Martha needs to stop being over-concerned with domestic things. Jesus perceives that a crowd should hear the wisdom of the beatitudes, blessed are the pure in heart and so on. The disciples are told to “follow me.”

The Israelites needed to be able to enter their promised land. Their journey required them to go through a change of character as a society. It is said that they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. It wasn't a random wander but a deliberate journey to achieve a purpose.

Now I am going to do what sermons traditionally do and turn this around so we ponder what is the route that is right for us.

We are the people of Knox Church. Linda and I have got to know enough of you to realise that this is a church of people who have energy and talent, and that comes with responsibility.

I believe people like us are needed. Our local society and our wider world calls us, and I think that is the same as God calling us. I cannot but believe that our calling is to continue to pursue the goal of peace, healed relationships, a better life for disadvantaged people.

While we were on holiday, I briefly listened to a street meeting that was focused on the damage we were doing to nature. It was while we were in Brisbane. It was on the theme "stand up for nature," and there were people dressed as koalas. I overheard the speaker say that the damage humans were doing was equivalent to a large asteroid colliding with the Earth.

I suggest that the overarching task before all humanity is to save our world from the ruination of our climate. We humans are living in ways that are taking us down a hugely destructive path. In that way humanity is not following a healthy journey of life.

We have our calling to do all we can to bring peace, justice, compassion. But what we are doing to the climate is the most compelling threat that we are facing and the destination that we should strive to reach is saving our liveable planet. Achieving all the rest we are called to do cannot happen on a ruined planet. For me, more than any other, saving our planet is the destination we should aim for.

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