**Joshua 3:1-17**

**Overcoming obstacles in the Christian life**

Before I was a priest, I was a Warehouse Manager for Waitrose - imagine that! But it’s true. And for part of my training, I had to go to the Lake District on a survival week - imagine that! But it’s true…

 It was the middle of January, snow was on the ground, none of us wanted to be there and we were desperate to get home; thoroughly fed up with the whole experience. On Day 3, I had to lead the training program and what we had to do was get from one part of the Lake District to another to pick up a mystery object. It was a 15-mile walk through freezing fog and my job was to work out how to get there and lead the team.

 We walked about five miles and all was going well and then we found ourselves in the middle of a moor and the fog was so thick we couldn’t see more than about 10 foot in front. But I looked at the map and saw that if we followed a particular stone wall, we would get to where we wanted to be. So I told the team to go in single file, keeping one hand on the wall and then we would all get to where we needed to be and no-one would get lost in the fog.

 A brilliant idea!

 But there was only one thing I forgot to check - and it turns out we had our hands on the wrong wall and we walked for more than two hours in the fog and ice and snow and we walked in a huge circle and ended up exactly where we had started.

 Well, I won’t tell you what the team said about me - but they weren’t suggesting that I apply for a promotion!

 And there was a lesson for me in that about life, which is that sometimes, despite all the best laid plans and our best efforts, sometimes our lives seem to go round in circles, don’t they? No matter how much we try to move forward, sometimes we find ourselves right back where we started.

 That can be true for the plans we make in life and it can also be true for our spiritual lives: our prayer lives, our dedication to worship and reading the Bible. We often don’t seem to make any progress at all; just heading round and round in circles…

 And we think, if only I could deal with this one barrier, then everything would be alright. If only I could get this one aspect of my personality sorted, or find more time, then I could get on with my Christian life. If only I could escape from the habit of swearing. If only I didn’t love to gossip so much. If only I could pray more, pray better, pray more sincerely. If only…whatever…then I could become a real Christian.

 I guess many of us are held hostage by a particular sin we keep committing, or a particular way of behaving we know is wrong, or a particular way of thinking that we know is ungodly. But no matter how hard we try, we can’t seem to get off first base and do anything about it.

 And that’s where we come back to this story from Joshua 3. Let me remind you of the story so far:

 The Israelites had spent 40 years wandering around the desert, waiting to enter the Promised Land – their inheritance from God. And Moses had died and God raised up Joshua as the new leader and his task was to prepare the people to enter the Promised Land. And Joshua sent out spies to do a reccy and they came back and said, “Yep, it’s all ready – we can take it whenever we want to”. And so after wandering around for 40 years, the people of Israel are now poised to enter the Promised Land: they are excited – it’s just over the horizon, a few kilometres away.

 And the only thing that stands between them and their inheritance – is the Jordan River. This one, last barrier before their new life with God. On one side, a cold, desert experience. On the other side a land flowing with milk and honey - the fulfilment of all their dreams. They are standing on the edge of something new: God is with them and Joshua is leading them confidently.

 But in their minds, there is still one nagging doubt – because they’ve been this close before. If you read Numbers 25, less than a generation before they had been at Acacia, in the same place, and could have entered the promised land then. But what happened? They fell into disobedience and turned away from God.

 They had come so close to entering into God’s blessings. But because of their sin, they were denied the blessing and stayed in the wilderness.

 And now, here they are again at Acacia after all these years. It’s as if they’ve gone full circle and they’ve got another chance to put it right and enter the Promised Land. Just the Jordan River to cross. If they could get over this one last obstacle, everything would be alright.

 But they knew they had come to the end of their resources. They had done everything they could but there was no way to cross the river in their own strength, using their own initiative. There weren’t any bridges and they didn’t have tools or equipment. And what’s more, verse 15 tells us that the river was in flood: it was running fast and wide and was impenetrable. Nothing short of a miracle would get them across that River. And I suppose as we look at our own lives and attitudes and behaviours, it would take a miracle for us to change as well.

 Well, how did they cross the Jordan?

 How do we tackle those things that stand between us and God?

 How do we claim God’s blessings in our lives and enter our Promised Land?

 The answer will be different for each one of us - a different answer for each set of issues - but there are guiding principles which apply to all of us, just as they applied to the Israelites all those years ago.

**1. We need to recognise that God is with us**

When Rebekah was a child, she used to come into our bed at night because she was frightened of the dark. But when she was cuddled up next to us, she could sleep perfectly well. So it wasn’t the dark she was afraid of – instead, she was actually afraid of being alone.

 And that is so true of us too: often it is not the problems in life we face that scare us so much as the idea of facing them alone.

 But the wonderful truth we cling to as Christians is that, even in the darkest night, when we go through our most difficult times, we are never, never alone: God is always with us. Jesus’ last words before he ascended to heaven were: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age”.

 God is always with us – we are never alone.

 And we see the symbol of God’s presence with his people in verse 2, where Joshua orders the people to follow the Covenant Box. “He said, “When you see the priests carrying the Covenant Box of the Lord your God, break camp and follow them.”

 This Covenant Box was, for the people of Israel, the symbol of God’s presence in their midst. It contained a piece of manna, symbolising God’s provision in the wilderness and Aaron’s rod, symbolising God’s authority over them. It was a holy object – a sign of God living in their midst.

 And if we want to overcome the insurmountable obstacles that hold us captive in life, the first step is for us to follow God; to remain in his presence: wherever God goes, we must follow. We will never overcome difficulties in our own strength, but by remaining in the presence of God we will be given strength to overcome.

 But how do we do that?

 The answer comes in verse 9, where Joshua says, “Come here and listen to what the Lord your God has to say”. There are two directives here:

 First, “Come here”. Joshua calls his people to meet together in the name of God and it’s true for us too: we need to keep meeting together; church attendance needs to become a regular habit. If we do not seek out fellowship with Christian brothers and sisters, we make it harder for ourselves to live in God’s presence.

 Coming to church is not a hobby to dip in and out of; it is the foundation to living with Christ. Church is not an optional extra. When we meet together we share and carry one another’s burdens and we gain strength from the fellowship we enjoy and we realise afresh that we are not alone…

 Verse 9 again: “Come here and listen to what the Lord your God has to say”.

 “Listen to the word of the Lord”.

 If we want to overcome the difficulties in our lives, we must listen to the word of the Lord. The Bible contains all we need for a revelation of God. It is sufficient for all our needs.

 So we recognise that God’s presence with us has two components: the human component, coming to church regularly, and the divine component, searching the Bible for God’s word to us. Neither of these components will take our problems away. But they will help us get them into perspective and give us the foundation for moving forward with God.

 We need the support of one another and we need the support of God.

 So the first principle is to recognise that God is always with us.

**2. We need to recognise that God wants us to be obedient**

We live in an instant society, a drive-through world, an X-Factor world, in which waiting for things and working towards things is increasingly difficult. And sadly, that attitude permeates Christianity too. We want God to work and to work now!

 Arrow prayers sound very spiritual – just when we pray quickly for something on the spot - and they do have a place in our lives. But they are no excuse for finding time each day for prolonged and concentrated prayer.

 The truth is – and it’s hard for us all to hear – that God wants people who will work hard at their faith over a long period of time. If we consecrate ourselves to God, he will do great things in us and through us. And purifying ourselves is a continuous action: Joshua isn’t saying that we need to be pure and holy before we receive God’s blessing. If we have made a start and are trying our best to be obedient, even though we may fail time and time again, if the intent is there, if the motivation is there, God will honour that and pour out his blessings on us.

 As we move towards God in holiness and obedience, so God moves towards us. And those things that have held us hostage, the power of sin and temptation, will all begin to fade away; in scale and importance.

 First then, we need to recognise that God is with us.

 Second, we need to recognise that God wants us to be obedient.

**3. We need to expect God to work miracles in us**

It is easy to forget that God is in the business of miracles and he wants to give us more than we ever think of asking him for…

 God longs for us to know his forgiveness. He longs for us to know peace and joy in our hearts. He longs for the sick to be healed and for past hurts to be forgiven. God wants nothing more than to mend our broken relationships. Everything you and I most hope for in life, God is itching to give us, as Jesus reminds us in John 10:10: “I have come so that you may have life in all its fullness”.

 But half the time, we don’t allow God the space to work in our lives because we don’t really believe that he will.

 But what does Joshua say in verse 5? “Purify yourselves, because tomorrow the Lord will perform miracles among you.”

 That is the promise to each one of us today; the same word to us as to the Israelites all those years ago. “Purify yourselves, because tomorrow the Lord will perform miracles among you.”

 Whatever it is that holds us hostage in life, we need to focus on the God of miracles, not on the size of the problem.

 And, for me, the greatest lesson of all from this passage comes in verse 8 where Joshua says to the people: “Tell the priests carrying the Covenant Box that when they reach the river, they must wade in and stand near the bank.”

 Can you believe that? The River Jordan was their greatest problem. It was the flood season, the banks were breaking and the current was strong. But God was not going to work his miracle until his people stepped out in faith, waded in and got their feet wet.

 And therein lies the challenge for us; in faith, to wade in and get our feet wet and allow God to do the rest…

What is our Jordan River? A personal weakness, our temperament, our human nature, a problem we are facing in life?

 If we fix our eyes on God and step out in faith, he will be faithful and honour us and he will bring us the healing we need. We don’t need to stay in the wilderness. The future needn’t be a repetition of the past.

 And as we prepare to bring that to God in prayer now, let me leave you with the words of God in Isaiah 43:1-3. You might want to close your eyes and let these words wash over you:

“The Lord who created you says, ‘Do not be afraid – I will save you. I have called you by name – you are mine. When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you. When you pass through fire, you will not be burnt; the hard trials that come will not hurt you. For I am the Lord your God, the holy God of Israel who saves you…You are precious to me. Do not be afraid – I am with you!”