

Exodus is necessary. AA June 2021

This talk is an explanation of one key aspect of why we are trying to do church differently. It is a talk focused on the importance of the presence of God.

This talk is all about slavery and freedom, and about God and his transforming presence.

Israel needed to be set free from what held them captive. God sent early Israel down to Egypt for their provision and protection, but eventually they became slaves. This was inevitable in a fallen world, and was part of God's Sovereign plan for his people. They needed to know they were enslaved, and needed to cry out to God for rescue.

Every individual and every church needs to cooperate with our own particular Exodus's. We need to be set free from what holds us captive.

If you can manage to take in this evening's talk, that may be a sign that you are open to the call to hear God. But you won't be able to hear the message if you don't know that you are in some ways lost, broken and trapped.

Here's a simple measure for you:

To what extent do you feel and know that God is joyfully sending you to share his love and good news with others? If this is strongly present in your life, you are likely to be familiar with God's presence. If you aren't doing this often, you are likely to need a fresh encounter with God.

At a personal level, we all understand that some things have a grip on us. Some of us may have become hooked on the pursuit of a career; bolstering our sense of identity through success. Some of us may be obsessed with our children's academic grades, qualifications or early careers, basking in their achievements. Others may be struggling with food addiction, or alcohol. Some may spend far too long in front of a mirror; forever concerned about their appearance. Some may be fixated on our money - forever checking accounts and pensions to make us feel safe and in control.

One particular, often unconscious problem for Christians is the subtle redesigning of church around our preferences - Where we adjust and trim church life to fit into what we like and enjoy; where we imagine our enjoyment of it as the main measure. We create church services and church small groups. And we presume that they are as God would want them to be.

But Jeremiah famously said, "Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" (7:4). Even holy things can become a snare.

With all these things, what begins as a pleasure, can end up as a problem. Sometimes without realising it, the way we do church gets in the way of church vision.

Exodus is necessary.

But the call of God at this time is not primarily reform of how we can do church (though that is inevitable). The call of God at this time is a return to God himself.

The Pandemic has been terrible in all kinds of ways, but it has also been a moment of potential rescue in others. God in his mercy has stopped the church in its tracks.

When song-writer Matt Redman wrote “I’m coming back to the heart of worship” it came out of a time where the focus had shifted onto celebrity Christians and big events. The song resists this and says instead, “I’m sorry Lord for the thing I’ve made it, when it’s all about you, it’s all about you Jesus.” The pandemic firmly pressed the pause button on church, and we have had the opportunity to properly consider what we are doing and why. Now is an opportunity to return to our true source, to reconfigure who we are and what we do around God.

Let’s remember the original story.

God first formed Israel by gathering them around his actual presence.

Remember the Exodus of Israel. With signs of power he set them free from the tyranny of Egypt. He broke the power of oppressive forces over them. He then led them through the desert by a pillar of cloud in the day, and a pillar of fire by night. God was tangibly with the people.

The exodus led to Sinai- where the holy presence of God was manifest in a dramatic display. The awesome reality of God himself was so powerful that they were warned not to touch the mountain while Moses was attending to the commands of the Living God.

Then they continued on, with new laws, and a tabernacle designed to host the presence of God. Wherever the presence went, the people were to camp there. The tabernacle was the centre. The presence of God was the heart of Israel. They only functioned because God was so obviously at the centre of their community life. God was the centre.

But Israel quickly rebelled against God’s ways. When they sinned and rebelled, God, proposed that he move on with Moses alone.(Ex 33.) The people had been set free from Egypt, but were now shown to be still enslaved to their own sinfulness.

(1-6)“Then the Lord said to Moses, “Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”

When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments. For the Lord had said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites, ‘You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you.’” So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb.”....(12-17) Moses said to the Lord, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favour with me.’ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember that this nation is your people.”

The Lord replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the

face of the earth?" And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."

They nearly lost the presence of God! As with Israel, so with the church. Without God's presence we are not who we are meant to be. Every individual and every church needs to cooperate with our own exodus's. We need to be set free from what holds us captive. We need God's presence more than anything else. But what does it mean to know and experience the presence of the Living God?

When Solomon built the Temple, the very presence of God filled it, so that the priests had to leave. (2 Chron. 7:1-3)

"When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the Lord because the glory of the Lord filled it. When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the Lord above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying,

"He is good;
his love endures forever." "

The Temple was filled with God's presence.

The whole faith of Israel was designed around God, and his presence at the Jerusalem temple. All the laws, sacrifices and festivals pointed to God and his holy presence. And his presence was revered.

Another example : Around 700BC Isaiah encountered a vision of God. (Ch 6)

" In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Isaiah encountered the Living God. He deeply repented and was changed personally, and immediately asked to be sent to others. Encounter with the presence of God naturally changes us, and leads to a sending out. So here's a question - To what extent do you feel and know that God is joyfully sending you to share his love and good news with others? If this is strongly present in your life, you are likely to be familiar with God's presence. If you aren't doing this, you are likely to need fresh encounters with God.

The story continues: One century later, distressingly this time, Ezekiel also had a vision of the presence of God - this time leaving the Jerusalem Temple. (Ezekiel 10). After many

years where Israel had rebelled against God, he finally chose to remove his presence from the Jerusalem Temple. This was the worst thing that could have happened.

After this point, there is no mention in the OT of God's presence returning. Only the hope of his coming again.

Finally, God in his great mercy sent his one and only Son. Then the word became flesh and tabernacled among his people. (John 1:14). Jesus was the return of God's actual tangible presence. He was the greatest manifestation of God on the earth. Jesus was the true temple, full of God's Spirit.

Jesus came to set the prisoners free. He brought life, forgiveness and restoration to all who were open to him. He led the captives into new liberty. And this applies to us of course. Every individual and every church needs to cooperate with our own exodus's. We need to be set free from what holds us captive. And it can include all kinds of enslaving things.

And, climatically, at the cross of Jesus, as he died in our place, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). Something fundamental and extraordinary had changed. There was a new place where God's presence was revealed. At the cross of Jesus, with the blood of God's Son covering over humanity's sin, the awesome presence of God was flowing out in all directions.

This signified the end of the the old order, and indicated a new access to the presence of God through the sacrifice of his Son. We meet God there; through Jesus, through his death. And his glorious resurrection celebrated this huge victory - ringing all kinds of changes for the universe. We have a new king, personally reigning on the earth.

Ahead of his ascension, Jesus commanded the disciples to wait, "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8). They were to be filled with power, sent out to the whole world. And so they waited.

The disciples had been with Jesus for three years. Then 40 days after his resurrection. And finally another 10 days waiting for the Spirit to come. They were deeply invested in the close presence of God the Son. Now they were to wait for God the Holy Spirit.

At the festival day of Pentecost the Spirit came, with wind and fire - just like when the presence led the Israelites by cloud and fire, or when the glorious cloud filled Solomon's new temple. The disciples, the gathered church, was the new temple for God's presence. (Acts 2).

And they were moved by the presence of God's Spirit to worship and follow - ultimately expressed in a natural, powerful witness across the Roman Empire. Literally millions of people were drawn into this movement, marked by the presence of God. Millions of people meeting the living God in the message of the cross.

Each individual believer was a temple; hosting the presence of God. Every church community was a collective temple, hosting the presence of God. And this affected their meetings as local church. They expected God's presence to be felt and known.

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul describes a meeting,

“If all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all. After the secrets of the unbeliever's heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, “God is really among you.” ”

1 Corinthians 14:24-25 NRSV

They were being set free from captivity, and setting others free too. We all need to be set free from what holds us captive. And we may need to be set free from the wrong idea about church.

We need to be honest. For many decades, the church in our time has been preoccupied with secondary matters. We have gradually, perhaps subconsciously, designed church around our preferences and needs, instead of around God himself. We have not camped around his presence. As a result, some have created a merely therapeutic church, where we are in fact the centre; shaping elements around our lives. Such a church has no power. And look at the growing evidence. Church decline in the West is a natural judgement on our neglect of God himself. Our present reality is a sign that something is seriously wrong.

We are confused about what to do. We imagine it is mainly about how we can strive to reach new people. But Jesus and the Early church had no problem reaching new people. They were focused on God, and so witness and mission happened naturally.

The solution to our circumstances is not mainly to do with style, or missional techniques. All those matters naturally flow from the true centre: which is the presence and rule of Almighty God. Until God is enthroned amongst us, churches will continue to decline and eventually disappear.

What we need is a re-focus on God himself. Effective mission and disciple-making naturally flows from surrendered, worshipping, waiting Christian lives.

To what extent do you feel and know that God is joyfully sending you to share his love and good news with others? If this is strongly present in your life, you are likely to be familiar with God's presence. If you aren't doing this, you may need fresh encounters with God.

God, in his mercy, has used the recent pandemic to stop the church in its tracks. He has pressed the pause button on what we do.

And some of us are now shaken to our senses. Some of us know that we simply can't go back to how things were. We are laying down our naive and shallow understanding of what to do. Some of us have 'reached the end of ourselves' - where we only have prayer and devoted waiting to offer. We are learning to live in the 'upper room', waiting on Jesus to send his promised help. I have been in several conversations where people have said that they simply don't know what to do. More than a few times, people have told me, "I think we need to get on our knees".

This is not about style or missional techniques. God is first after surrendered hearts. This is not simply about doing church life differently (though some of us are re-reading the gospels as a clearer blueprint). Jesus is looking for humble, broken, contrite disciples. The only way forward will be on our knees. These humble people will be the ones who find God.

Every individual and every church needs to cooperate with our own exodus's. We need to be set free from what holds us captive.

If you are still listening, you may be open to the call to return to God. But you won't be able to even hear the message if you don't know you are lost, broken and trapped.

If we are desiring to have church our way, we are slaves. If we are simply wanting to fit church and God into our comfortable lives, we are slaves. If we are unwilling to give up everything, for the sake of having Christ, we are slaves to something else.

But for those who long for God the Father, for his presence, for God's Son, for his Holy Spirit, we will be changed. And set free from whatever holds us. When God comes, all our perceptions of what is important begin to change. When God comes, we remember who he is and who we are. And in God's actual company we let go of everything else. When we truly lay down life and our plans, receiving Jesus as our King, everything becomes simpler and clearer.

We become less concerned with what others think, and more bothered about obeying God. We become less focused on rota's and schedules, and more bothered about a truly shared life and mission, with the Risen Christ actually filling and guiding things. We will long to be sent, and long to share what we have.

Every individual and every church needs to cooperate with our own exodus's. We need to be set free from what holds us captive.

And God is drawing near to those who are open.

About 6 months ago I wrote on my study Whiteboard;

- “1. Planning to leave where you are.
2. Finding others for Shared life & mission.
3. Leaving and starting.”

This is beginning to happen. People are letting go of existing things. People are reconsidering what should continue. Some are talking to friends and leaving groups to form something new focused on God and his mission.

So how might you respond?

Acknowledge the past. Recognise that things aren't right.

There has been a painful gap between our vision and our reality.

We haven't been as Christlike as we should: He was utterly devoted to his Father.

We haven't made disciples like he did.

Jesus is calling us out of Egypt. He wants his people for himself.

To what extent do you feel and know that God is joyfully sending you to share his love and good news with others? If this is strongly present in your life, you are likely to be familiar with God's presence. If you aren't doing this, you are likely to need a renewed, submitted, obedient encounter with God. And we all need to wait on him.