**Wilderness-real and metaphorical -The Chosen People**

Exodus 9: 1-8  and 1 Peter 2: 9-1

What image comes first into your mind when you see or hear the word "wilderness"? Is it some romantic vision based on 'The Desert Song' or is it somewhere bleak, dry and threatening? The latter is the truth, as Moses sang in Deut. 32: 10 " In a desert land He found him, in a barren and howling waste" referring to Jacob and his descendants. God, often, uses a wilderness both real and metaphorical to reveal himself and change the destiny of a single person or people.

There are two significant features about living in a wilderness.

Firstly, it is uncomfortable for you-harsh on the eye, the skin and the body. There is no vegetation-green is a restful colour-the sun beats down pitilessly by day, while the nights can be freezing-there is no water nor anything to sustain life. The silence can almost beat into the ears. Survival seems impossible.

Secondly, you are alone-far from the safety of the familiar, the routine, all human support and the distractions of living in a social bubble. On the other hand, the quietness can give the opportunity for God to speak and be heard. That sums up the Israelites' situation in Ex. 9: 1-2. After their tumultuous escape from the Egyptians, they had spent three months trekking through the desert to camp at the foot of Mt. Sinai-a site sun-bleached dry and rocky. They were uncomfortable and alone, apparently. Then God called for Moses v 3. to instruct him about his plan for them.

B. God's Plan for the Israelites is outlined. It is extraordinary in his showing huge undeserved favour or grace to them and it is extraordinary in its scope. These are shown in the injunctions to "look back", "respond now" and "look forward”.

**1. "Look back" v 4 Recall**

a) what He did in Egypt which could not survive without the Nile. The first six plagues all relate to the first-the Nile turned to blood or poisoned-the next three are a crescendo of natural disasters culminating in the tenth-the death of all Egyptian first born males.

b) how He carried them out on eagles' wings-a poetic image of their safe rescue as their flight and the heart stopping parting of the waters of the Red Sea seemed in retrospect.

 c) how He brought them to Himself in a more vivid, clear cut and personal relationship than they had had before. The Israelites feared the Lord, as the midwives had shown in Ex. 1: 17 and 20, but now they would be shown, memorably, how to worship Him and follow His ways fully.

  All of this escape showed the huge undeserved favour of God towards them. He had chosen them "out of all nations" v. 5 and "the whole earth" was His as well v. 6.  He did not choose them,  because of their numbers, but because He loved them and had set His affection on them Deut. 7: 7-8. How amazing and humbling!

**2. "Respond now" v. 5.**

a) They must obey fully or whole-heartedly and they "all responded together, 'We will do everything the Lord has said.'" v. 8. So far it looked promising, for God replied v. 9 "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you &  will always put their trust in you." This, of course, was not always the case and they did not always want to hear what God said, which may ring true for us.

 b) They must keep his covenant or agreement, which had been made, originally, with Abraham, whose descendants would, at some point, be given the land of Canaan, while he agreed to obey God. This was sealed, then,  with circumcision. Now the details about what obeying and worshipping God involved would be given shortly-hence the Ten Commandments and the laws of Moses.

**3. "Look forward" -the scope of God's plan for the Israelites vv 5-6**

 a) they were, in the wonderful phrase, his 'treasured possession'-they were treasured and special to him in the same way that we say we have a great sentimental attachment to some item loaded with personal memories for us. As a possession they belonged to God-this made them significant and not to be tossed aside by events, which should have been a great encouragement

b) they were in a more difficult phrase 'a kingdom of priests'. As priests they had access to God. They could even be intermediaries to bring others to God-a role they grew into after the Exile, so that in Jesus' day some Jews sought to make disciples of pagans. The Israelites were part of a kingdom in the sense of a group which acknowledges God's rule.Only the title "King of the Belgians", nowadays, gives a hint of this meaning. We tend to think of a kingdom as a geographical area like the "Kingdom of Denmark”!

 c) they were 'a holy nation', which may bring to mind being strait-laced, judgemental and austere, which, sadly, is what has often happened to groups trying to follow this idea-as in some Puritan settlements in America. In fact, holy means to be set apart to follow God's ways of compassion, forgiveness and justice. The holy nation should be a sort of prototype of a society that really reflects God's love and grace. Given our fallen nature (even when redeemed) this sort of society will only be fully shown in Heaven, but that's not to say we should give up trying to make the sort of society that pleases God.

 In short, this revelation of God's plan could be both exciting and challenging, but it gets better when we explore 1 Pet. 2: 9-10. Peter takes up the picture of Ex. 19: 5-6 and applies it to Christians. He sees us as the *new Israel.*

**The new Israel.**

a) the 'chosen people (v.9) belonging to God' which (v.9) echoes the "treasured possession" said of the old Israel. Christians are chosen by being 'called out of darkness into his marvellous light'. This contrast continues with moving from being "not a people" to now being"the people of God". Or again, once not having "received mercy" to "now you have received mercy". In other words, this new chosen people has been reconciled to God, which is all part of God's "marvellous light." Sometimes it is said that a child, who faces the huge challenge of being adopted, is helped when they realise they have been specially chosen by their new family. that could encourage us.

 b) the 'royal priesthood' reflects the "kingdom of priests". Christians have the same role of access to God through our Lord Jesus Christ and of intermediaries to point others to Him-'we may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' of pardon, peace and purpose. Here is a challenge for us.

c) the 'holy nation' which suggests a work in progress for each one individually and as a church family. I am encouraged that unlike the old Israel we have the promise of the Holy Spirit to help us in our transformation. "And we who...all reflect (or contemplate) the Lord's glory (of character) are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord , who is the Spirit" 2 Cor. 3: 18,

For us as Christians chosen to be the new Israel,-a challenge in what might be a metaphorical wilderness of the lockdown for us.

*1. Look back with thankfulness at God's undeserved favour lavished on us with the Lord Jesus Christ bearing the penalty of our sins.*

*2. Response now-are we willing to obey Him for transformation into a holy person or nation?*

*3.Look forward to and be strengthened by His promise that we are a treasured possession ,belonging to Him, as we face life's ups and downs, while seeking to become more like Him.*