

Passages read: Numbers 13:1-3,26-33, Hebrews 3:7-19 C.A. Strong

### **There are Giants in the Land!**

“Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, ‘We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.’”

The thinking behind what I want to say this morning was sparked off by a recent conversation I had with one of the elders. He had been thinking about Joshua and the lessons that his life has for the church today. He made particular reference to the passage that we read this morning, and how the people of Israel had been paralysed by fear of the giants in the Promised Land. He then raised the question about the giants which frighten us from moving forward as a church.

Numbers 13 opens with expectation of some real excitement. The people of Israel were on the edge of the long expected Promised Land. God had brought Abraham to this place about 400 years earlier and had promised him that this was the land that he was going to give to his descendants. However it hadn't been simple and straightforward. The people of Israel had gone through incredibly difficult times as they had been subjected to slavery in Egypt. They had experienced dreadful misery and hopelessness. Yet when they had called out to God he had answered in his time.

God had raised up Moses to lead them out of Egypt. He had demonstrated his great power by striking down the Egyptians with the various plagues. Israel had had a miraculous escape as the people crossed the Red Sea on dry land and then the Egyptians were drowned as they pursued them. God had protected his people. He had guarded and guided them through difficult times, and now here they were, almost at the Promised Land. God had been faithful to his word; he had brought them to their new home.

And so leaders from each of the twelve tribes were sent ahead to spy out the land, so that they could explore it and make plans accordingly. They found it was indeed a land that “flowed with milk and honey”. That's basically just an expression that means there was an abundance of good things in the land. There was fertile soil which yielded good quality produce. This was it. They had arrived at the Promised Land!

Only it wasn't quite that simple. The land was already inhabited. The spies brought back their reports: “The people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large... The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.” So near and yet so far! They had seen the Promised Land, but they weren't able to take it. The obstacles were far too great to overcome. It wasn't even worth trying.

Caleb, however, backed up by Joshua voiced another point of view: “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” It was a big challenge that lay before them. The occupants of the land weren't just going to move out and hand it over to them. There were battles to be won; there were risks to be taken. It wasn't going to be easy. The way ahead for them was going to be very demanding. It was going to take courage and commitment.

The other ten were not up to the challenge. Only Caleb and Joshua thought it seemed like a good idea. These two men focussed on God while everyone else around them focussed on the giants. They saw the potential while others saw the problem. They wanted to move forward towards their goal while everyone else preferred to stay where they were, even though they didn't really have anywhere to stay. They were all aware of what God had done in the past. They had all experienced the deliverance from Egypt. God had been faithful. He hadn't brought them this far just to abandon them. However Caleb and Joshua seemed to be the only ones who were able to really believe that.

As a result that whole generation missed out. They were not able to take possession of the Promised Land but left to wander around the wilderness for the next forty years. Of the twelve men who had been sent out to survey the situation only Joshua and Caleb survived long enough to live in the Promised Land.

I came across an interesting quote this week. Virginia Satir was an American author and psychotherapist, and was apparently widely regarded as the "Mother of Family Therapy". I don't have any depth of understanding of her theories, and I have absolutely no idea if she had any religious convictions, whether Christian or otherwise. However, I was fascinated by something that she said, which it seems to me is very much supported by the passage that we read this morning. She said: "Most people prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty."

"Most people prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty." I don't think that she had the people of ancient Israel in mind when she said or wrote that. The story that we read does not, on its own, prove her to be right, but I think that eight out of ten spies is reasonably impressive evidence in her favour. Why would they want to continue wandering round the wilderness with no apparent purpose? Why not move forward into the land that God was giving them? At one level it seems so stupid, but yet I can understand it because I can recognise that there is a security in the familiar. Even if we are not happy about where we are it can be preferable to stepping out into the unknown. We would rather have predictability than take risks. We seem to have an inbuilt fear of changes or new initiatives. What if they don't work?

That's a sweeping generality. The degree to which it is true will vary considerably from person to person. Some people are more adventurous than others and more willing to have a go at things, even if they might not work out. However, I think that there is a lot of truth in Virginia Satir's statement: Most people prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty."

I certainly haven't studied her work, but I know that her original application is in the context of family relationships. You only need a few minutes watching *Supernanny*, or one of the programs where the experts are called in to deal with difficult teenagers, to see the principle illustrated. The parents often find it easier to live with the problems than to take the decisive action needed to change them. The same principles can also be applied to the programs *How Clean Is Your House?* and *You Are What You Eat*. There are many other applications where people are confronted with changes that they need to make in their way of life, or in their thinking or in their attitudes. They cannot argue with the logic of what they are being told, but the thought of moving from the familiar to the unpredictable makes them very uncomfortable. They prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty. It's only when they can break down that barrier that they can move forward.

It seems to me that ten of the twelve the Israelite spies suffered from the same problem. I can't help thinking that we as a church are a bit like the people of Israel. I'm not speaking just of our congregation, but the church in general. We bemoan the state of decline in which we find ourselves. We complain about the lack of interest and the failure of so many people around us to appreciate their need for God. We see society crumbling around us as God's ways are ignored and at times even ridiculed. We wonder where it's all going to end. Like the people of Israel, we seem to be wandering around the wilderness without any sense of direction or purpose.

It's not a very encouraging picture, and yet I can't help wondering at times how much we really want to see things improve. Would we like to see more new people coming in who were hungry for God, but didn't understand the traditions and the culture of our church? Would it make us uncomfortable to drastically change the way that we do things? Do we find our security in the familiar and the predictable?

Caleb and Joshua thought differently to the other ten. The others saw the giants in the land, and they concluded, "We can't do this, it's not even worth trying, we haven't a chance." They were beaten before they even tried to start. Perhaps they were just frightened by the giants, but I think they were even more afraid of the uncertainty. Caleb and Joshua had seen exactly the same things that they had seen, but they came to a very different conclusion: "We can certainly do it." They saw the giants, but they also sensed God's leading, and so they were not afraid.

As individuals and as a church we face many giants. We live in a secular age where so many people have no concept or basic understanding of the things of God. The church has so many other activities to compete with that it gets crowded out. We come across so much indifference and at times even hostility. Perhaps for some of us the biggest giant is fear itself. We are apprehensive about sharing our faith, and about telling others what Jesus means to us.

I'd like to tell you that I'm far more like Caleb and Joshua than the other ten, but I know that that is not always true. I can so easily be distracted from what God wants by focussing on the giants. And yet I am inspired by their faith and their obedience. I want to learn to trust in God as they did, and to follow through with God.

In our New Testament passage the writer to the Hebrews uses this story as a serious warning to his readers, and to us. The people of Israel missed out on what God wanted to give them because they were frightened to move forward in faith. God was not pleased with them. He saw it as rebellion. We are urged to learn the lesson from that, and hold onto our faith, to look to God and to trust him. We are exhorted to encourage one another daily, so that we are not deceived by sin's deceitfulness.

Let us all aim to be more like Caleb and Joshua. Let us look to God rather than the giants, and let us press on to take hold of what he wants to give us, even when it means moving out of our comfort zone.