



Where will Moses take us today?

It's a beautiful Jewish saying (and one worth repeating) that when human beings make plans, God laughs. Yesterday, the PCC had an awayday together, and unlike our recent awaydays, we didn't make a plan. But one of the things we did do was watch a *youtube* video of some very striking stats about the world as imagined in 25 years' time or so. The pace of change was breath-taking and the knowledge a little overwhelming.

It reminded me of some of the issues that were raised in the debate we held here on Wednesday which was about how business might be ethical in a 'post truth' world. We had some PR executives and a journalist from the FT talking about what 'post truth' is: whether it's a new phenomenon, whether we should worry about it, what is the effect of the internet on how we work, how we interact with each other, and whether capitalism should be modified (what's often called conscious capitalism), or whether the system needed a re-think altogether. One of the PR professionals talked about us living in 'filter bubbles'. I thought that was like 'echo chambers', but it's more than that. It means groups of people not only all basically agreeing, but also getting their information from the same sources. These 'filter bubbles' are being described partly to explain the vote for Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in the sense that society, despite being very connected in some ways, is also becoming a collection of siloes, where groups become unable to hear the point of view of another group. These siloes seem to have such a different set of assumptions that it is impossible to understand, or even to try to understand.

The journalist Jon Snow spoke recently of his own shame when he went to cover the Grenfell Tower fire, the enquiry for which opened this week. He acknowledged that he, along with other fellow journalists simply hadn't pursued the issue of social housing or gone to find the stories of people who were struggling. And he lamented the same issues raised in this church here on Wednesday. He said:

Our connectivity – life on Google, Facebook, Twitter and more – has so far failed to combat modern society's widening disconnection. We could end up in a vicious circle, with ever more extreme and partisan sources of information reinforcing people's prejudices and an ever more vitriolic news feed...

Or we could make a real effort to provide news literacy, to create a society that is finally as concerned with what it reads and views as with what it eats.

[Jon Snow/The McTaggart lecture August 2017]

For thoughtful Christians, wanting not only to survive but to thrive in this fast-paced world, one of the key resources we have are the gospels, including the gospel of Luke we heard this morning. The gospels are, in themselves, collections of evidence for the presence of God in the world, most dramatically and irreplaceably in Jesus Christ. How can we rest in that good news? How can we drink in that depth of wisdom in order to help us navigate, and more than navigate, help to shape the world that is changing around us?

A young person starting a technology-focused degree this week will face a bewildering pace of change in their subject. By the time this student reaches their third year, 50% of the technological information they will have learned in their first year will be obsolete. Students are now being educated to fill jobs that don't yet exist. The world of work is changing rapidly: most students now will have between 12 and 15 jobs by the time they are 35. And speed and emotion are two highly influential aspects of this kind of world. One of the PR professionals on our panel this week said that he advised his clients, if they are, for example, an airline following a crash or any kind of company following a disaster, that they must start communicating not later than 15 minutes after the event.

The church is not known for its speed. We are not particularly known for our emotion. Do we become simply curmudgeonly in the face of this change, grumpy old Anglicans who develop a

Canute-type religion holding back the irresistible tide of change?

Or can we find a way to interpret it together, faithful to the gospel, faithful to the beauty and justice that we glimpse when we speak of the kingdom of God? Resisting all that draws us away from God and embracing that which gives us consolation in the truth?

Luke's gospel gives us a clue here. Luke is the only gospel to mention this conversation we heard this morning between Jesus and, apparently 70 people who were sent out to bring first and foremost a message of peace. Why 70? Numbers are always important in the Bible as they are in life. Moses appointed 70 elders of Israel and so Luke is identifying Jesus with Moses, linking Jesus with the seismic, defining event in Jewish history – the Exodus. In this way, he is framing Jesus as the leader of *a new Exodus* – the journey from slavery to freedom.

This has been done by others. The key abolitionists in the campaign to end the transatlantic slave trade often talked of the Exodus, the movement from slavery to freedom, as their guide and inspiration.

And today (the 17th of September) happens to be the anniversary of the escape from slavery of one of my heroes. I have been inspired by her story ever since I heard it when I was studying Black Theology in Birmingham. That person is Harriet Tubman. She escaped slavery on this day in 1849. Harriet Tubman was particularly famous for her Underground Railroad, a network of safe houses and transport links organised by abolitionists. She resolved to go back and rescue friends and family which she did. She was given the nickname "Moses" by abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, for obvious reasons. And so, the songs she sang became code for hope in this world, not just the next. *Go Down Moses* was her signature tune as she travelled south to help slaves escape to the north.

Harriet Tubman is quoted as saying, "I freed 1000 slaves. I would have freed 1000 more if they'd known they were slaves."

Her deep wisdom (*I would have freed a thousand more if they'd known they were slaves*) got me thinking, about the new Exodus of Luke's gospel and the nature of our society that we've been debating this week.

It's important to say that modern slavery is real and around us in London today.

But perhaps like some of you, I was involved in putting together some of the events for the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. This year 2017 is the 210th anniversary. And one of the most prominent anti-slavery campaigners, the freed slave Oloudah Equiano, was baptised at St James's, in that font in 1759.

This year, too, marks the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK. Stories that haven't properly been told before, have been told about the brutality of "conversion therapy", and enforced castration, not to mention systematic imprisonment and loss of life itself.

Here at St James's we hosted the Christians at Pride service during this anniversary year. The church was packed and the service was joyful. At the end, just as we were going to give the blessing, a man interrupted the service and came to the front. We weren't entirely sure what was going to happen. But the General Synod had just voted that day to condemn the pernicious practice of conversion therapy. This had been announced at the service, to wild applause. This older man came forward to say, in a rather faltering voice, that he had been made to go through this conversion therapy from the age of 12. He told the 400 people here that he had been made to watch porn, and had had electric shock treatment. His testimony was haunting but defiant. He ended it by saying, with a raise of an elderly eyebrow, "...and I'm pleased to tell you, I am still gay."

These kinds of anniversaries cause me to ask myself. What is it we are doing now in church and society that in 100 years' time, or, given the pace of change, 25 years' time, they will look back and say, "What were they thinking?"

What is *the new Exodus*, the movement from slavery to freedom, that is needed today?

Can we see it now? What the slave owners transporting slaves in a ship called *The Good Ship Jesus* couldn't see? What attitudes, assumptions, and patterns of behaviour are we enslaved by, both in our private lives and our social action?

“I would have freed a thousand more,” said Harriet Tubman, “if they’d known they were slaves.”

Song was incredibly important in these movements of Exodus. Miriam sang and danced at the Red Sea, and Harriet Tubman used the spiritual *Wade in the Water* (a song we sing here at baptisms) not only to recall this event as part of the journey to freedom, but to remind slaves that they should frequently cross rivers to stop their scent being picked up by the dogs unleashed to catch them.

In today’s society, who are the people, of any background, who need this spiritual inspiration combined with sound political advice as they make their way to freedom?

I’d have freed a thousand more if they’d known they were slaves.

The anti-apartheid campaigner and novelist Alan Paton had one of his characters say something interesting about being politically active as a person of faith.

He said, “When I get to heaven, the Judge will say to me, ‘Where are your wounds?’ And if I say I haven’t got any, he will say, ‘Was there nothing to fight for?’” (Alan Paton *Ah, but your land is beautiful*)

I pray for us, for you and me, that we will be people who are willing ourselves to make the journey of the new Exodus that Luke described Jesus leading us. It’s a journey provoked by the Spirit of God, from slavery to freedom.

I’m often asked by people, so what can I do? The single most important thing you can decide to do is to commit yourself personally to remaining open to the provoking of the Spirit, to ask God in our prayers, every day, to be shown in what ways we are enslaved and how we can join the journey to freedom.

But also, even today, there are plenty of ways to join in our communal effort here to live with these questions: you could find out more about the *Camino* course (the adult Christian formation course that we run here that will start again in November). You could join, or sponsor the team of us who are sleeping outside overnight on Friday 13th October to support the work of our Night Shelter. You could come with us next June to Berlin and Nuremberg and Auschwitz as we make a pilgrimage to face the bleakest episode in European history and learn from it. You can come to read the Scriptures together in our *Gospel conversations*, you could take part in our amazing festival of art and science that is our *Eco Fun Palace* (Sunday 8th October).

In all these small ways and in so many ways every day at work, around this city, at home, we can take part in the new journeys from slavery to freedom, wherever we find them.

And with you, I would like to thank God for Harriet Tubman, who escaped on this day. And ask for her courage and energy to escape our own slavery and keep making our journey, together, to what I believe with all my heart, is for all of us, a promised land. Amen