

Our Built-in Barriers to Faith

Sermon preached at St Paul's, Boronia, on 17th June 2007

Today just happens to be John Wesley's birthday. Had he lived, he would have been 304 today. Just a couple of years older than that hymn we just sang.

Last week Ken preached on "The Greatest Enemy of Faith."

He talked about how trials and difficulties are enemies of faith. And he suggested, quite rightly, that trials and difficulties can actually be an opportunity to *increase* our faith. Instead of letting problems get the better of us, Ken said, we have the chance to trust God even more. To use our faith even more. To increase and strengthen our belief in God and his love and his desire for the best for us.

And that's how it should be, but truth is, many of us fail these tests of faith. Trials can indeed be a great enemy to faith.

This week, I'd like to spin off Ken's theme of last week. I'd like to use this story we heard this morning, this story about the children of Israel heading for the Promised Land, and talk about the barriers to our faith that are built-in to the way we are made and the way we are raised.

So this morning's address is titled, "Our Built-In Barriers to Faith." And I want to ask *What* are these built-in barriers to faith? *Why* are these barriers to faith built-in to us? And *How* do we overcome these built-in barriers to faith? What? Why and How?

Let's re-visit the story as read to us a few moments ago.

Moses had led the children of Israel on a fantastic trip.

The nation had been slaves in Egypt. And Moses had been called by God to lead them out of slavery and back to Palestine which was described as a land flowing with milk and honey—the Promised Land.

The Egyptians had been rather reluctant to let them go. To say the least. One has some sympathy with the Pharaoh. After all Moses was suggesting that he remove an entire cheap labour force. I'm sure if John Howard had been Prime Minister of Egypt he would have told everyone that the economy would be irreparably damaged if the slaves all left. Even in Pharaoh's time, I'm sure there were national leaders who could reduce everything to economics.

But God sent a series of plagues that showed that keeping the children of Israel in Egypt might be worse for the economy than letting them go. So finally, the Pharaoh relented just long enough for the Israelites to get away.

They got as far as the Red Sea before Pharaoh changed his mind and went after them.

But then God parted the waters of the Red Sea long enough for all the Israelites to get across, and short enough for the following Egyptian army to be drowned.

On they went into the desert, heading for the Promised Land.

They got to a place where there was no good water, and God showed Moses how a certain kind of wood could be used for purifying water. And then they soon moved onto a place where there were 12 springs and 70 palm trees. It was all very idyllic and they were enjoying themselves.

After that they set off into the desert and pretty soon ran out of food. And the people grumbled, so God sent bread and meat from heaven.

In another place God showed Moses how to get water from a rock.

A bunch of people called the Amalekites came out and fought with the Israelites, and as long as Moses arms were propped up, they won the battle.

Moses went up Mount Sinai and got the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets which as a child I found a bit hard to swallow. I mean, how do you get 5 commandments on each of those little aspirin tablets? So tiny.

And soon after, if you plug on through Exodus, God sent very, very detailed instructions about how to build the Ark of the Covenant, how to dress the priests, how to build the mobile sanctuary they called the Tabernacle and so on.

And then came the Golden Calf incident.

Things had been going swimmingly so far, but for some reason, maybe because Moses was away so long up Mount Sinai copying down the instructions for the dimensions of the Tabernacle tent, and the Priests' ephods and stuff – anyway, for some reason, the Israelites decided to stop worshipping God and built themselves a small god of their own in the shape of a golden calf. Moses wasn't too thrilled about this, and God was even less thrilled threatening to burn them all up on the spot, but Moses argued with God and God changed his mind and just sent a plague, which was good of him. And Moses had to go back to the chemist for new tablets.

And that pretty much brings up to the point in the story we read about today.

So what happens now?

Well, the Israelites are on the verge of going into the Promised Land. But before they do, God tells Moses to send out a reconnaissance party. So one man is chosen from each family group to go and explore the land. Among these men were Joshua and Caleb.

So, the exploration team go off and find a land flowing with milk and honey, and grapes and pomegranates. And a few people already living there. Some of whom, apparently are rather large and fearsome.

The exploration team come back and deliver their report. And, it turns out that the majority report is “Let’s not go.” The people who live there are too powerful, their cities too well fortified, and there are too many of them.

But Caleb and Joshua have a minority report. Caleb says, “Come on. We can do it.”

And Joshua says the same – Just do it!.

Well, to cut to the chase, they don’t. The naysayers win out. The doom and gloom people win the day. The fearmongers carry the argument.

And, once again, God is not pleased. God had given them an opportunity to have faith in his promise. The Promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. And they had instead trusted, not God, but their own military assessments of the likelihood of success. I guess it is one of the earlier historical examples of the truth that military intelligence is a contradiction in terms.

The result? Not a single one of the people who decided against going, lives to enter the Promised Land. Not one. Over the next 40 years, the Israelites wander the desert. And one by one, all the people who cast a negative vote die off, until only a new generation is left to enter the Promised Land. Under the leadership of Joshua who had argued for them to go ahead 40 years earlier.

What is it about change that caused the Israelites to have so little faith in God’s promise? Despite having experienced so much evidence of God’s faithfulness? Wouldn’t you think they would have been simply super-faithful? Instead, when they are faced with opposition, their faith crumbles.

What is it about change that causes our faith to crumble?

I think Machiavelli summed it up best:

“There is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than the creation of a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who will profit by preservation of the old institutions and merely lukewarm defenders in those who would gain by the new one.”

I think one of the built-in barriers to faith for the children of Israel was the very fact that God had looked after them up till now. They had water when they needed it. They had bread in morning and meat in the evening. They’d been opposed and survived. They’d found the odd oasis and enjoyed rest. Things were looking pretty good just as they were, thank you very much. And you want us to go into a strange unknown land, with people we don’t know, in fortified towns we are aren’t certain to conquer, and some of these people are rumoured to be giants anyway. No thanks, I like things just as they are.

What is going on here?

Well, in every human heart there is a lead weight. It's a kind of inertia. It stops us from moving ahead. It's called the status quo. The way things are. And always have been. World without end. Amen.

The status quo. One of the biggest built-in barriers to faith.

As Machiavelli correctly observed, most of us prefer the way things are. And the more comfortable and secure we are in the way things are, the more we will oppose any change.

Judy and I had lunch last Sunday with Rowland and Jan Croucher. Rowland and Jan are both Baptist pastors, now more or less retired. Some of you know them. There was a time in their life when they accepted a call to a church in Vancouver, Canada.

Now Rowland and Jan are the kind of people who have overcome their built-in barriers to change. And Rowland decided to change the order of the Sunday service slightly. He decided to move the Offering, from the middle of the service to the end. He figured the offering at the end would work better that way as a response to God.

But what he didn't realise was that he had challenged a longstanding element of the status quo in that church. You couldn't mess with the order of service. It was just too disturbing to some people in power in that church. Indeed, Rowland had raised the "enmity of all who would profit by preservation of the old institutions and" he had "merely lukewarm defenders in those who would gain by the new one." It led to the end of their ministry there. It's unbelievable. Except it is so common that you know it's true.

Another friend told me how he sat in his church vestry meeting for a whole night while the church debated the colour of the pulpit Bible. Not the version. Not whether to make the pulpit Bible King James, or New International, or The Message. Something that might be worth a 15 minute conversation in a vestry meeting. But whether the Bible should be changed from its traditional black cover to red or blue or green.

The status quo. A built-in barrier to our faith.

Do you remember the story of Jesus at the Pool of Bethesda? This was a pool where the disabled came in hope of a cure. The story went that if you were first to get into the waters when they were disturbed, you would be cured.

Jesus goes up to one guy who has been sitting there for 38 years. Thirty eight years!

And Jesus asks him "Do you want to be healed?"

The guy answers "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

But Jesus didn't ask him that. Jesus didn't ask him for a commentary on the status quo. He didn't ask him how things were. Jesus asked him "Do you want to be healed?"

But this man, disabled for 38 years, could not see the possibility beyond the way things were for him. He was stuck in his own status quo.

So if our desire for the status quo answers the question *What* is the built-in barrier to our faith, *Why* is it so?

Well, for this we can simply blame the way society works to protect the way things are, to preserve the status quo. And also we can blame our parents and the way we are brought up.

Throughout childhood most of us are told to stick with what we know. Don't be adventurous.

When did you first hear the proverb *A bird in the hand, is worth two in the bush?*

Think about this for a moment. A bird in the hand. Two in the bush.

You mean there's TWO in the bush?

Where do I get a ticket to the bush?

Similarly, we are taught from an early age, not to talk to strangers. Well, OK. Not a bad rule for kids I suppose. But why is it that, for the rest of our lives, whenever we go into a room full of people ... people with stories we have never heard ... people with things to teach us we have never learned ... strangers we have never met ... and we look for SOMEONE WE KNOW.

If we never talked to a stranger, would we ever learn anything new?

And what about "Don't reinvent the wheel." Or, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." They say that Jack Welch, the former chief executive of General Electric used to say "if it ain't broke, break it." He used to reorganise the whole company every few years just to shake it up. Just to upset the status quo.

Our parents and our society try to teach us that "necessity is the mother of invention." But I'm not sure. That's like putting a stop sign on an intersection after a crash. We're going through this now with trains and trucks aren't we? After the truck collides with the train there is an outcry to find a prevention.

But would it not have been nice if, instead of waiting for the necessity caused by the dreadful death toll, someone, about a hundred years ago, had had the vision to see that one day roads and rails might be a dangerous combination. If someone had said in 1910, "we better make sure all these roads and railway tracks are separated by bridges and tunnels."

Actually, probably someone did say that, but they were ignored by people who would profit by preserving the status quo.

In the later part of the 1800s there was a Bishop in the United Brethren church in America who famously railed against attempts by young men to build flying machines. The idea of

humans being able to fly was an abomination in the sight of God, and to be condemned as the sin of over-reaching ambition. Birds were made the air, and man was made for the earth.

On the 17th December 1903, this same United Brethren Bishop received a telegram from his sons, Wilbur and Orville, announcing that they had succeeded in flying their machine 112 feet.

There's a story told of a young man who is walking through the streets of a well-to-do suburb, admiring the grand mansions as he goes. In a meditative mood, he prays, "God, I could never imagine living in a house like that." And he hears God reply, "And that's why you never will."

Friends, does our imagination extend only as far as our known universe? Are we locked forever into the status quo? Do things have to be as they ever shall be, world without end, Amen?

Well, if we understand what our built-in barriers to faith are, and why they are, how do we overcome them?

First of all, I need to say, it is a matter of faith.

Our other reading this morning is by way of a benediction from Paul. Here it is:

EPH 3:20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us...

I guess the question is, do we believe this? The faith question is in two parts.

First, are we allowing God's power to work within us? Or are we relying too much on our own power? This was something Ken talked about last week, so I won't go over it. But suffice to say that too many of us, and I include myself in this, too many of us rely on our own resources and not enough on God's power to work within us.

The second part is that God is "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine". No matter how much you imagine is possible, God can do more. Immeasurably more. More beyond our ability to measure how much more.

Do you imagine it's possible that you can get the job you want? God can do immeasurably more than you can imagine.

Do you imagine we can complete our building project at St Paul's? God can do immeasurably more.

Can we make poverty history? God can do immeasurably more.

So the first answer to the HOW question is one of faith. Do we have the faith that will allow God to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, through the power working within us?

The second answer to the HOW question is about timing.

The story of the children of Israel's escape from Egypt is a great example of what happens if you get your timing wrong.

There is a right moment, and a wrong moment, in which to embark on a new enterprise. A right time for change, and a wrong time.

If you get your timing right, you can go onto success. If you miss the moment, you can waste 40 years wandering around in the desert.

William Shakespeare said most things better than anyone else, and on the question of getting the timing right, he is most eloquent in Julius Caesar:

There is a tide in the affairs of men

Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;

Omitted, all the voyage of their life

Is bound in shallows and in miseries.¹

There are moments in our lives when things are rushing along, like an incoming tide. Shakespeare suggests that, if we take off at these moments of high energy, or "flood", we go onto fortune and success.

But if we miss the chance, if we "omit" to jump on the tide, we can spend our whole lives stuck in the shallows and in misery.

Two things are clear about William Shakespeare. The first is that he read his Bible and he must have known this story about the missed opportunity of the children of Israel.

The second thing is not so well known, nor so obvious. Namely, that Will Shakespeare must have been a body surfer.

Let me deal with the body surfer first.

I love body surfing. I had grandparents who lived at North Avoca Beach on the Central Coast of New South Wales.

North Avoca Beach is nestled up against a rocky headland. This causes the waves to break early and to form ideal conditions for surfing. I didn't much like the surf until I was five. And then I lived in it for the next ten years. I joined the Life Saving Club. I learnt to ride a surf board. In those days they were nearly 10 feet long and about as manoeuvrable as the Queen Mary. But, best of all, I learnt to body surf.

¹ William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616), "Julius Caesar", Act 4 scene 3

Now, it is clear to me from what Shakespeare wrote, that he also was a body surfer. Because there is a right moment and a wrong moment to catch a wave in the surf.

Most inexperienced surfers seem to think you catch the wave when it breaks. This is wrong. I see some of you nodding in agreement.

No the right moment to catch a wave is just BEFORE it reaches its full height. You catch a wave on the way UP.

The trick is to time your swimming to reach the same speed as the wave, just in the moment before the wave reaches its full height. If you time it right, you are in for a great ride all the way to the beach.

If you time it wrong, you spend the next few moments dumped into the shallows because you were too early and the wave broke on top of you, or you spend the next few minutes in misery, because the wave sails right past you and leaves you pretending that you actually pulled out at the last moment because the stars weren't properly aligned at that time.

And, as Will Shakespeare also knew, this is what happened to the Israelites. They were going full steam ahead from Egypt. Now was the moment, while they were in full flight, enjoying success, at the top of their game.

And they blew it.

The Israelites failed the faith test. Despite God having done immeasurably more than they could have imagined, they simply did not have the faith to follow it through.

Worse, they missed the moment and it cost them, not just 40 years, but a whole generation of wasted lives and wasted time.

Friends, let us not be the generation that dies out in the desert. If God is calling us to have faith in his plans for us, let us not fail to get going while the going's good.

Amen.