

## **Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday Service at Home!**

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**The text below can also be accessed in audio version at**

**<https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com>**

**Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> July 2020 – “And the Cloud moves on”**

### **Introduction**

Good morning, and welcome to this Podcast from Chalmers Memorial Church, Port Seton. My name is Tom Gordon, and, as a member of Chalmers Church, I have, like all of you I'm sure, been very thankful during these months of Lockdown that we have Robin Allison as our minister, and for the warmth and content of his Podcasts week by week. But to give Robin a well-earned break, you'll have me for the next two Sundays, to share worship with you, wherever you are. I'll still be continuing with my "Thought for the Day" too, and I'm grateful to all of you who've shown your appreciation of these. Your feedback means such a lot.

Robin's been guiding us through a series on prayer in recent weeks. So I thought I'd offer a little two-week mini-series in a different way. So, let me explain.

I've always been someone who's thought and worked things out with a visual image, a picture in words, to explain or de-mystify a complicated idea or piece of theology. When I was a Parish Minister and took New Communicants through a class looking at aspects of faith before they joined the Church, I would use one of the sessions to help people talk about what God meant in their life. Now, that's hard as we all know. It's difficult sometimes to find words to express what we believe. So we did it visually. I put two chairs in the centre of the room and asked each person in turn to imagine themselves sitting on one of the chairs and to position the other chair in the place where God was in their life. It's amazing what came out of that. Often, the chairs were put side by side or face to face. On one occasion a lady said she only needed one chair because most of the time she was sitting on God's knee and occasionally God was sitting on hers. One man even took a chair into the other room and said, "God's out there and I'm in here, and we pop in and out to see each other on a fairly regular basis."

You see what I mean? You can try it sometime. It's amazing what you can get from a visual image. So that's what I'm going to do this week and next – offer you a visual image, a picture in words. Next week I'm going to go to the New Testament for my picture. But today, I'm taking you back to the beginnings of the Old Testament for a

powerful image. And you might like to have your bibles open at the book of Numbers, chapter 9, for the story which we'll share with you later.

But for now, we have a time of prayer. So, let us pray.

### **Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer**

Living God, you reveal yourself to us in so many different ways ... in the beauty of your created world, the seas, the fields and the hills; in moments of wonder and pleasure, beyond words or explanation; in revelations of faith, when all seems right and good; in the tenderness of friendship, a kindly word, a helpful action; in the words of scripture, when the Truth comes close; in the holiness of worship, in Church or at home; in the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour. And what do you know of us? The same as you did before, for we are still committed yet still full of faults; still faithful yet still failing; still believing yet still weak; still hopeful yet still in need of your grace and mercy.

So hold us in your love. Accept our regrets and forgive us our sins. Bless us with healing. Set our feet on new paths of service, faithfulness and love. Bless us in our worship, wherever we are today. Let our living-room be a cathedral of your holiness; our kitchen a meeting place with your presence; our bedroom a resting place in your grace; our garden an embrace of your beauty; our walking a journey in your company.

And now, together, we say the prayer that Jesus taught us, the Lord's Prayer.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, for ever. Amen*

### **Bible Reading – Numbers 9:15-23**

Listen now to our Bible reading. It's taken from the Book of Numbers, one of the five History Books which begin the Old Testament. These books lay before us the story of God dealing with his people, and all the joys and sorrows, failures and successes of the Children of Israel. In this passage, the tribes of have escaped from captivity in Egypt, and God has commanded them to build a tabernacle to house the Ark of the Covenant – which Robin told us about a few weeks ago when he shared thoughts with us about Solomon and prayer. The Ark of the Covenant contained all that was precious to the people in their faith and obedience to God, including the Tablets of Stone that contained the Commandments. Where the Ark of the Covenant was laid down, that was where they worshipped. So, that's the background, and our Bible Reading will be read for us today by Amanda Johnston.

### **Reading (by Amanda)**

The Bible Reading this morning is taken from the Old Testament, from the Book of Numbers, chapter 9, reading verses 15 to 23. Numbers 9, and at verse 15. Let's listen for the Word of God.

*On the day the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant law, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning, the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire. That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire.*

*Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped. At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. When the cloud remained over the tabernacle a long time, the Israelites obeyed the LORD's order and did not set out.*

*Sometimes the cloud was over the tabernacle only a few days; at the LORD's command they would encamp, and then at his command they would set out. Sometimes the cloud stayed only from evening till morning, and when it lifted in the morning, they set out. Whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud lifted, they set out.*

*Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out. At the LORD's command they encamped, and at the LORD's command they set out. They obeyed the LORD's order, in accordance with his command through Moses.*

We give thanks to God for this reading from his Word, and to his name we give glory and praise. Amen

### **Reflection**

Thank you very much, Amanda.

One morning a few weeks ago, I took our dog out for her morning walk. It was a bright and mild morning and we headed out for our familiar morning amble, down towards the Port Seton harbour, along the *John Muir Way* behind the *Thorn Tree*, back along Cockenzie High Street, and home for breakfast. It's a lovely walk, enhanced by the colour of the boats in the harbour, the vista across the Forth to Fife, the waves on the rocks, and the view towards Leith, Edinburgh and the Forth Bridges and Crossing. I was looking forward to it. But when I got to Wemyss Place and looked across to the

harbour, I could see next to nothing. A morning mist was still lingering. I could just make out the outline of the harbour and the boats, but I couldn't even see the front door of *Brian Lees Car Repair Shop*. The mist had obliterated almost everything. "Low flying cloud," my wife calls it. And, mild though the morning was, I couldn't help but give an involuntary shiver as I looked at the mist-covered scene.

We don't care much for being in a mist, or a fog, or in low-flying cloud. It's a symbol in scary movies that something bad is going to happen – "It was a dark and stormy night, and the cloud hung low over the ramparts of the castle ..." – that kind of thing; it's dangerous to drive in such conditions; sailors will tell you it's dodgy at sea; and I can recall on many occasions my sister telling me, when she ran the Casualty Department of the Hospital in Fort William, of yet another climber or walker who'd been caught unawares when the clouds had come down. And we say, do we not, that sometimes our mind is like a fog when we can't think straight; or we criticise someone who's too airy-fairy when we say, "They've got their head in the clouds."

Mist, fog, low-flying cloud, all carry negative connotations for us. But, not so for the Children of Israel. For them, the cloud had a very different significance. For there was no fear in the cloud for them. There were no negative thoughts about the cloud. The cloud was a gift from God, a visible symbol that God was with them.

We're told back in the Book of Exodus that God had led them out of Egypt with the guidance of a Pillar of Fire by night and a Pillar of Cloud by day. Indeed, the story of the crossing of the Red Sea tells us that God placed the Pillar of Cloud between them and the pursuing Egyptians so that they could make good their escape. And here they were in their desert travels with the cloud, the promised cloud, still with them.

So, where the Ark of the Covenant was laid down with its tent covering above it, the cloud was there. This was the holy place. This was the very presence of God. And when the cloud lifted, the Israelites moved on. And wherever the cloud settled, they stopped, made camp, and worshiped God again. And that's how it continued. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. When the cloud remained over the tabernacle a long time, the Israelites obeyed the Lord's order and didn't move on. Sometimes the cloud was there only a few days; at the Lord's command they would pitch camp, and then at his command they would set out. Sometimes the cloud stayed only from evening till morning, and when it lifted in the morning, they set out again. Whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud lifted, they set out. Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out. At the Lord's command they set out – when the cloud moved on.

There are some who might say that the Covid-19 crisis is a cloud that has descended on us and that it's obliterated all the good things, the clarity, the promise, the plans, and caused us to live in fear, and be in a place of "not knowing" – which we don't like at all. We're befuddled. We're confused. And maybe, if we're honest, we're just a wee bit scared. The cloud has descended – and things are difficult economically, in education, for the Health Service, for our children's schooling, in family life, in the way our society will be. And we don't like being in a cloud.

And that's true in Church life too – locally here in Chalmers, throughout East Lothian and across the length and breadth of our country. What is familiar, predictable, routine, normal, traditional, acceptable, expected ... has all been thrown into confusion because of the cloud that's come down. I understand that, and, to be honest, I feel that sometimes too. I have no more certainties about what will emerge from all of this when the cloud lifts than you do. And I don't like it much either. Because being covered by a cloud has all the negativity with which we're all too familiar ...

But the reading from the Book of Numbers, and the picture of the cloud, tells a *different* story. Firstly, God was in the cloud; and, secondly, the cloud moved on.

Firstly, God was in the cloud. Where the cloud settles, where the cloud stops, that's where you have to be, God says. Trust me. Did I not take you out of captivity? Did I not give you leadership? Did I not reassure you about the Promised Land? So, why doubt? Why be afraid? You have to be where you have to be. Settle yourself. You're on a long journey. You're a pilgrim people. So, in the words of Corporal Jones in *Dads Army*, "Don't panic, Mr Mannering! Don't panic! Don't panic!" Settle yourself. Take time. Be aware of my presence. Gather round the Tabernacle. Be at peace. For however long you've to be here, this is where you have to be. God was in the cloud.

God is in *our* cloud. God is telling *us* not to panic. God is saying, "This is where you are and this is where you need to be. I haven't left you. Indeed, I'm more present than when you're bashing on with your journey without a thought. God is in our cloud.

My granny – whose wisdom I go back to from time to time – used a good Scots' phrase in such circumstances ... "Dinnae fash yersel', son. Dinnae fash yersel'..." That's what God was saying to the Children of Israel. And that's what I believe God is saying to us when our cloud has come down. "Dinnae fash yersel' ..." For I am with you in the cloud.

And secondly, the cloud moved on. Hours ... overnight ... days ... weeks ... a year ... the cloud moved on. This was no settled people. This was a pilgrim people, a tent people. This was no band of itinerant builders ready to build a structure. This was a people who were always ready to move on ... When the cloud moved, they moved. When the

cloud stopped, they stopped and worshipped their God. When the cloud moved again, they moved on. It was a given. It was the norm. It's the way God wanted it to be.

Have we become too settled as a people of God? Oh, I know, we're not *physically* on the move, wandering about, not knowing how far or how long. But in our faith, in our structures, in our spiritual life, have we, perhaps, lost our sense of pilgrimage, our "travelling light", our willingness to change and adapt and move forward? Might God be calling us out of the cloud with a call to move on, to develop, to be restless, to be obedient? And the cloud moved on ... Where will we be on the journey with God when that happens to us?

### **Closing Prayer**

Living God, you are the light that guides us, the cloud that protects us, the blessedness that heals us, the spirit that challenges us and the presence that sustains us. So now, as we pause in prayer, cast a halo of love round all those for whom we are concerned

We pray for those who lead us and teach us, that they, being followers of the light of truth and justice, might bring the light of love for us all. Bless our decision-makers at local, national and international level.

We pray for those who cast a mantle of protection of care and concern around us. Thank you for the wisdom of our scientists, the dedication of our care staff, and the planning of our teachers. Thank God for them all.

We pray for those whose blessedness heals us: for Robin our minister, and for Julia and their family, and for all who minister to one another in our church. We give thanks for the blessings of those who care for us with emails and phone-calls, FaceTime and WhatsApp, assurances of prayer and acts of kindness.

We pray for the challenge of your spirit, for all that encourages us, that renews us, that enables us and takes us forward. And we pray for your presence for all who are in need; those who are sick at home or in hospital; those who are bereaved; those who are struggling; those who are cast down with despair.

And we pray in silence for all whom we carry in our hearts and minds. In the holiness of your presence, as the Children of Israel gathered at your Tabernacle, we trust your response to our prayers, for you know better than we do what our needs are. Hear these our prayers, which we bring to you in Jesus' name. Amen

### **Benediction**

Go in peace. When the cloud moves, go with God. When the cloud settles, stay with God. And may God's blessing rest on you and all those you love, on every step of your journey of life and of faith. Amen.