

**Sermon: 2020/10/25 (21st Sunday after Pentecost, Year A) -
Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6,13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8;
Matthew 22:34-46_BTR**

[Ask for children to come forward. Pre-arrange to have someone call cell-phone once staring competition is under way.]

Kids Talk: The Greatest Commandment

What does it involve to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind'? [v.37]

Hm?

A lot of effort. ...

I am *excellent* at staring competitions.

Unbeaten.

The best.

Who here wants to try their luck against me?

Anyone?

(I need a volunteer.)

[Begin the staring competition. After a few seconds, phone rings: answer it. Start blinking.]

Hello?

[Child reacts.]

What do you mean I blinked?

Did I?!

Oops!

It's very easy to get distracted.

And it's very easy to stop loving God with 'all our heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind'.

We're going to need *His* help to keep this commandment.

Let's pray:

Father God, send the Holy Spirit, we pray, to..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to return to their places.]

Title: Faith in the Face of Death

As you know - because I've probably already told you, I'm quite a big fan of C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* stories.

And one of my favourite moments is from the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

Do you know it?

Such a great book!

Almost the last in the series.

Well, the heroes are called the Pevensie children, and the two youngest - Lucy and Edmund, along with their unpleasant cousin Eustace Scrubb, are sucked into a magic painting of a sailing ship - "a sailing ship" shaped a bit like a dragon.

And they have this *amazing* adventure battling sea-monsters and befriending invisible, one-legged dwarves.

But Narnia isn't a globe (like the real world), it's flat(!), like a disc, and, because of this fact, eventually, the Pevensies and their friends reach the *end* of the ocean:

it gets shallower and shallower and shallower, until the ship they're in is almost grounded.

Well, the main protagonists decide to disembark, and to continue to the *very* edge of the sea in a small row-boat with a special companion - a talking warrior-mouse called, "Reepicheep."

The waters which were salty - as you would (naturally) expect, become sugary sweet, and full of floating flowers.

And then, *suddenly*, the travellers can go no further:

early one morning, ahead of them, as the sun rose, 'they saw...[that] a wall stood up between them and the sky';

a wall of 'wonderful rainbow colours.'

(I'm quoting from the novel, now.)

And beyond it mountains - 'warm and green and full of forests and waterfalls however high you looked.'

This was "*Aslan's* country." - the ferocious flying-lion who symbolizes the Christian God.

And Reepicheep - the "warrior-mouse" - decides to go on through this 'wall' alone, to that wonderful place that they could see beyond.

He throws away his sword.

And, stepping through, is never. Seen. Again.

The children, you see, are prohibited from going with him by Aslan.

The scene is *very* poignant.

It makes you want to bite your lip.

Which reminds me of a moment from my own life - of a "lip-biting" separation.

Of being with someone who went to a place that I couldn't immediately follow.

That "someone" was Rebekah.

We had only been married a couple of months - after a "whirlwind romance," when a letter arrived from the (British) government saying that her visa wasn't valid and she was going to have to go home to America.

I can still remember - *vividly* - standing at the airport at the entrance to the security area, which was all roped off to keep me out.

And I didn't know when I was going to see her again.

Would it be months?

Absolutely; no question.

Years?

Possibly.

We had no money.

We couldn't afford for me to go too.

We couldn't afford to even begin the application for her to get new "papers."

And it was so painful - not knowing how things would turn out - that I couldn't watch her leave!

I had to walk away before she did:

I couldn't even wave or pretend to smile a smile of reassurance.

Because I didn't actually know when I would see her again.
(And this was in those primitive days before Skype or FaceTime or Zoom, by the way.)

And perhaps you've lost someone?

Not merely to a journey to a foreign or fictional country, but to death?

"*To the grave*," as often the biblical writers put it.

As the Israelites had lost their beloved leader, Moses.

On Mount Nebo, as we hear described today.

From its (tall) peak he could, like Lucy, Edmund and Eustace, see the "Promised Land" - Canaan - the land flowing with milk and honey.

Lush and verdant compared to the monotonous, grey deserts he had had to walk through to get there from Egypt, which he had left many years earlier.

Forty years earlier, in fact.

Of wandering in circles.

Of battles with fierce pagan tribes.

Of burning, hot sun.

But he wasn't allowed to go any further:

There wasn't a wall of rainbows preventing his entry.

There weren't airport staff barring his way.

It wasn't that he was too poor to buy the correct stamp for his passport as Rebekah was.

No, what was keeping him in the wilderness - in Exile - was his sin.

Moses was a great man, yes, but he had made *many* mistakes.

Bad decisions.

He had made ethical compromises;

he had complained about and challenged God.

And, of course, he had *killed*;

committed murder.

It didn't matter that he had been young and impetuous.

It didn't matter that the victim was a sadistic slaver.

His reputation with God was ruined.

Moses had shown himself to be fundamentally unfit for the Lord's *initial* plan of a new kind of humanity living in a defined area between the Mediterranean coast in the west and the Euphrates in the east.

This "new kind of humanity" was going to be a 'royal priesthood' who would model exemplary moral conduct to the other nations of the earth.

And Moses had disqualified himself.

Moses had disqualified himself by choices he had *freely* made, which meant he wasn't suitable to be a citizen - *let alone a leader* - in what was intended to be "Heaven-on-earth."

Just as you and I are disqualified from the Kingdom-which-is-coming-but-isn't-here-yet.

We need Jesus to intercede for us - to "break open the gates of brass" as the Psalmist puts it: [107:16].

And so did Moses.

But Jesus hadn't come yet, so Moses was going to have to wait.

And yet, even though I've compare us to him, *in reality* I think we're more like the many unarmed Israelites who Moses left in the valley *below* Nebo.

C. S. Lewis in the *Dawn Treader* is *obviously* drawing a parallel between Moses and the Pevensie children.

That's undeniable.

But if we're going to situate ourselves in these stories, we need to be clear about who it is that we're *most* like.

And in the previous chapter of Exodus, the text is full of mention of Moses' followers - it lists the Hebrew tribes.

It speaks of 'all Israel': [32:45].

Notice, though, that Moses is completely alone when he gazes into Canaan.

And it is a glimpse which is supernaturally enabled:

verse one - he was granted a vision of 'the whole land', we're told.

But there's no way the human eye could see that far!

We're talking about hundreds of miles.

It was, then, an act of God.

An act of *mercy*.

But it was one - a gift - that was, we see, *not* extended to those following Moses.

They weren't given the reassurance of seeing what he was shown.

And the various sailors in the dragon-shaped sailing ship who didn't go on with the Pevensies and Reepicheep in the row-boat I mentioned didn't see what they saw either.

Those sailors were left behind, wondering; questioning; *worrying*....

And that's who we are in these tales, isn't it?

And that's who we are this morning:

We've seen sooo(!) much tragedy and loss this year.

- COVID, the famine in Yemen, the war in Armenia....

We must, then, cling to hope.

This is the challenge.

But not to a groundless, baseless hope!

We "cling" to the hope of the Empty Tomb.

That's *hard* evidence.

As is the existence of the Church.

As is the faith of those who went before us, the Apostles and the Saints in particular. Saints like Moses.

This is all *impressive* evidence that God *does*, in fact, have something beautiful waiting *just* around the corner of this life, just out-of-(mortal) sight.

This is the promise of the Gospel.

So, let's stand to affirm our faith.