

Sunday 4th July 2021 – Acts 7:30-42 ‘History lessons’

‘Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.’ This famous quote of Winston Churchill’s was given to parliament in a speech Churchill made in 1948. In fact the quote isn’t original to Churchill: in a nice illustration of the point he was making, Churchill had himself learned from history by adapting what was originally written by the philosopher George Santayana in 1905: ‘Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it!’

It’s a timeless truth, and invaluable in every age – perhaps never more so than now. Nowadays history is treated as an interesting hobby – there have never been more historical programmes on the television than there are now, to say nothing of the millions of people who love researching their ancestors and family trees, and that’s all to be celebrated – but it’s rarely given the vital role assigned it by Churchill or Santayana.

We’ve been in love with the idea of progress for a long time, but in recent years we’ve taken this to a new level: many people now believe that the extraordinary rate of technological change in the last generation has made much of what we thought we knew redundant. And whilst the pace of change is bewildering at times, arguably outstripping what human societies can reasonably adjust to at present – I think it’s foolish to believe our own hype. Whatever gadgets and trinkets we surround ourselves with, **there are some fundamentals that don’t change in any generation: people are still people, and God is still God.**

The bible certainly places a high value on history – not just as an interesting subject of study, but as something which shapes our lives for the present and the future. God’s people are constantly called to remember their past, because it is the story not just of themselves but of their journey with God. All of their main annual festivals are *calls to remember*: the story of rescue from Egypt at Passover, their selfishness which needs divine forgiveness at Yom Kippur, God’s provision of all they need at Pentecost and Tabernacles. Remember, remember, remember.

And in Stephen’s famous sermon to the Sanhedrin (the religious authorities) in Acts 7, what he shares is one amazing history lesson. It’s a long chapter, so we’ve only used a portion here today, but over 50+ verses Stephen gives a wonderful summary of the story of God’s people. And he does it to make two very simple, but absolutely foundational points:

First, history is a story of human disobedience. However sophisticated we may think ourselves – and bear in mind that the first century AD saw itself as the most sophisticated society there had ever been up to that point, not unlike our own self-assessment today – there is a fault line running throughout all of human culture and behaviour, and that is that we all sin. Call it what you like: selfishness, greed, win at all costs, them and us, playing god, doing what I like when I like it... it’s just *there*. It’s been there since Eden, and it’s hard-wired into every human being – including you and me.

We find it across society and also in God's people: none of us are immune. In today's passage, it's very clearly there in the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt – and how often has that story been repeated in every culture across the world. But we also find it in the rebellious attitude of God's people even after his miraculous intervention: rejecting God and refusing to obey him.

And whilst we can point the finger – something we humans are good at! – if we're honest, we're no different. How quickly we call God into question, even when we've had great blessings, and great answers to prayer in life. I can't look at the people of Israel and honestly say that I'm much different – can you?

There's a simple history lesson here, and if you asked me to give a two-word summary of all 1,000 pages of the Old Testament, it would be this – **people sin**. That's not an excuse not to read it, by the way! But that is prevalent theme of much of those 1,000 pages.

But there is another two-word summary. It doesn't appear on quite as many pages, but it's even more important, and we also see it here in Stephen's sermon – people sin, but **God saves**. God saves!

In the passage we see God rescue his people from oppression and set them free; he also gives them the Law, a complete code by which to live their lives. Throughout the chapter, God is at work: in calling Abraham, in miraculously providing heirs, in bringing good out of Joseph's kidnap to Egypt to save his people, and later by giving his people a land. The whole bible is a story of grace, of God's undeserved mercy and favour towards ungrateful people – not just like them, but like you and me.

And if the passage ends with the uncomfortable season in the story when God appears to reject his people, what that leads to are the prophetic promises of a future rescuer, the Christ, in whose name Stephen is now preaching and working. Hence his frustration that the authorities stood before him are still failing to learn the lessons of history.

But what about us? There's a simple message here for us too. *Remember*. Remember who we all are – fallen, flawed, broken people. But above all, remember who God is – the God of grace, of rescue, of second, third, fourth and fifth chances, of a new hope and a new future. People sin – but God saves.

And may this gracious God continue his saving work, in us and in others, today. Amen.