

## Chapter 13

### 'Moses is Dead'

*After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord,  
the Lord spoke to Joshua, Moses' assistant,  
saying "Moses, My servant is dead".*

One of my favourite films is *Fiddler on the Roof*. I love its fast moving scenes and its optimism. No matter what the situation he is facing, and he faces many difficulties, Tevya, the central character always looks for the positive. The story is set in a fictitious town called Anatevka at a time when there were severe pogroms against the Jewish people just prior to the Russian revolution. The story follows the struggles of Tevya in holding on to the traditions of his people. He sees that Jewish tradition is what has held them together as a people over many centuries, even though scattered over the whole world. He struggles to let go of these traditions in the face of changing times. His love for his family and his daughters eventually force him to let go of some of his long held traditions.

There are some things, however, that he just cannot let go of. When one daughter marries a gentile he cannot reconcile his traditions with his love for his daughter and he tells his wife that as far as they are concerned their daughter is dead. It is a sad and painful scene. The film does not make any judgement about the rights and wrongs of their traditions. They come across as the cement that holds them together as a family and as a people. They also appear to be something that prevents them from going forward.

Seeing the film set against a biblical understanding of God's commands for the Jewish people as given through Moses, one thing is clear. Tevya does not compromise on any of the biblical commandments. He keeps the Sabbath and wears his prayer shawl. He touches the mezuzah on entering and leaving his house. He does not consent to his daughter marrying outside of the faith. In that respect he is a good law abiding Jew.

The other traditions, however, are the ones that he allows to be overlooked. For example, the matchmaker who by tradition would find a husband for his daughters is over-ruled. At her wedding he dances with his wife when tradition would segregate the men from the women on such occasions.

As I reflected on both the biblical and the man-made traditions, I saw comparisons between this community in Anatevka and the church. Much of the church is full of traditions – some are biblical and others are man made. Denominations are experts at setting out how things are to be done within their congregations. They have a statement of faith which is good. Anyone wishing to belong to them must assent to their statement of faith. They then have an additional list of rules that members are expected to adhere to, many of which are not biblical. You must do this! You cannot do that! Attendance at these times is expected! "Ah!" I hear you say, "We do not have such rules!" Is that true? They may not be written down, but by your custom and practice they are probably there all the same.

I was shocked when I went to a baptism service of a young friend of mine. After he had been baptised and changed into dry clothes, he was welcomed into membership by the pastor, given a baptism certificate, a membership certificate and a pack of 52 envelopes with his name on. This, I was advised, was so that the church could record his tithe! We have added so much!

Now we have altars, priestly robes, processions, bishop's chairs and rings, 'holy' water, prayers for the dead and so much more. In England, and other countries, the regulations as to how the

church should act and what it can and cannot do is laid down by law. In some churches man-made traditions have become equal in importance with biblical instructions. To many, Mary, the mother of Jesus, has become of such importance that to some she is seen as a co-redemptory with Jesus. This means they believe that because she suffered to see her Son suffer, her suffering will also take away sin. We have become caught up in our traditions and ‘our way’ of doing things.

I love the story of Joshua. What a man of God! He was one of the twelve spies sent by Moses into Canaan to see what sort of land it was. Ten came back with a good report of the land but a bad report on the saving power of God (Numbers 13 and 14). Ten said, ‘The land is good. It flows with milk and honey, just as the Lord said. But there is a problem. There are giants in the land and we cannot go in.’ Joshua and Caleb said, ‘The land is good. It flows with milk and honey just as the Lord said. There are giants in the land, but they are no problem, because the Lord has given us His promise!’ The people of Israel listened to the ten spies and did not go into the land of promise. Of that whole generation, only Joshua and Caleb were allowed to enter the land. The rest wandered in the wilderness for forty years until a new generation were ready to take the missed opportunity.

Joshua was the assistant of Moses and was ‘trained’ by him. Wherever Moses went, Joshua would go. When Moses went to the tent of meeting to meet with the Lord, Joshua would be with him. (Exodus 33:11). When Moses went up Mount Sinai Joshua went up with him (Exodus 24:13-14). Now, forty years later, Moses has died and Joshua is at the River Jordan looking across at the land that the Lord had promised. The Lord spoke to Joshua, saying:

*“Moses My servant is dead!”*

The first thing that God spoke to Joshua as he was about to take the people into the Promised Land was to tell him something that he already knew! *‘Moses is dead!’* What a strange beginning to a new relationship! Joshua knew that Moses was dead. He had been with him for over forty years. They were probably more than co-workers, they were good friends. Joshua was probably mourning the death of the great leader of his people and his best friend. God was not giving out information, He was saying something much deeper. To paraphrase,

*“Joshua, Moses is dead. He is no longer the leader of the people. You are now the leader. Moses is dead. I do not want you to hold on to Moses. This is a new day for you and for the people. You are the leader and I want you to listen to Me. I do not want you to listen to Moses. If you are to lead these people, then you must learn to lean on Me and not lean on Moses. Moses was yesterday. Joshua is today! Let go of Moses and hold on to Me”.*

Until this day, Joshua had always had Moses to depend on. Moses was the one who made the decisions. Moses was the one who acted. Joshua, I am sure, helped Moses and learned from him, but it was Moses who carried the responsibility for leading. Now Moses is dead and Joshua is the one with that responsibility. I am sure that he was well taught by Moses, but the people did not belong to Moses, they belonged to God.

God told Joshua to prepare the people to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. If Joshua had not let go of Moses I can imagine him asking himself “What would Moses do? When Pharaoh was chasing us after we left Egypt, and we stood with the Red Sea before us and the army of Pharaoh behind us, what did Moses do? Ah yes! He stood before the sea and lifted his staff and the waters divided. Therefore, I will stand at the River Jordan and raise my staff over the water and ....”

*“Joshua, Moses is dead!”*

“This is what I want you to do Joshua. Do not lean on Moses. Let go of yesterday. I want the priests to carry the ark about 1,000 yards ahead of you. As soon as they step into the River Jordan the waters will be cut off and stand upstream as a heap.” “But Lord, What Moses did was to...” “Joshua, Moses is dead!” ...and that is how they entered the Promised Land!

The Lord does not mean that Joshua should forget everything that he had learned from Moses or that it was of no value. We cannot forget the past and indeed we should not forget the wonderful things that God has done for us. As I have already written, I do not forget the night that I was saved. It was the greatest miracle that I will ever experience. I do not forget the blind eyes and deaf ears that I have seen opened, I do not forget the many thousands of healing miracles I have seen in the name of Jesus at our open air meetings and on numerous other occasions. I do not forget the many answered prayers. I do not forget the wonderful teaching that I have received over the years. The remembrance of them spurs me on towards hopefully greater things today. The Lord does not want us to forget these things, neither does He want us to hold on to them. When we are tied to the past it is not possible to move forward.

The first city that Joshua came to after the people had crossed the River Jordan was Jericho. The Lord told Joshua that He had given the city into His hands. Great news! Again what would have happened if Joshua had tried to copy Moses? “Let me remember what Moses did. Mmmm! When Israel fought with the Amalekites we prevailed all the time Moses held up his hands. Therefore, I will stand before the gates of Jericho and hold up my hands until the walls fall down and...”

*“Joshua, Moses is dead!”*

“Joshua, remember what I told you. Yesterday is gone. This is a new day. I do not want you to copy Moses but to listen to me. I will tell you today what you need for today. When I gave you manna in the desert I gave it to you every day. It was not for tomorrow and you did not eat what was left over from the previous day. Every day is new and every day I will give you what you need for that day. I want you to march around Jericho for seven days and..... remember, Joshua, Moses is dead!” And Jericho fell.

When the disciples were with Jesus, I am sure they learned from Him and looked for a method to follow. When Peter raised Dorcas from death (Acts 9:36-43) he put the mourners out of the room and then said “Tabitha, arise.” It was a copy of the time that Jesus had raised the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:49-56). He had learned from Jesus. But what about praying for the blind? On one occasion (Mark: 8:23) Jesus spat on the blind man’s eyes and then touched them. Later when He came across Bartimaeus I can imagine the disciples thinking ‘Now He will spit on his eyes!’ but Jesus didn’t touch him. The disciples thought they had a method but Jesus did something different. In John 9, with another who had been man born blind, Jesus spat on the ground and made mud and put that on the blind eyes and told him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam.

We so much want a method. There are books in the Christian bookshops with such titles as ‘Ten Steps to Holiness’, ‘Fifteen Steps to Evangelism’, and ‘Nine Steps to a Successful Marriage’. Maybe one day I will write a book entitled ‘Twelve Steps to Remembering All the Other Steps’! We want a method so that we know what to do and how to do it. God does not want us to follow steps but to follow Him! He does not want us doing today what we did yesterday – unless He tells us that is what he wants today.

*“Christian, Moses is dead!”*

Every day is a new day. Every opportunity is a new opportunity. God wants us to depend on Him each day and not to lean on yesterday or be tied to our man-made methods and traditions.

When Joshua was preparing to go into the Promised Land, God told Moses to leave a gap of 1,000 yards between the Ark of the Covenant and the people so that “*You may know the way by which you should go, for you have not passed this way before*”. WE need to learn to stand back and let God lead us. We may think that we know what God wants because we have been in a similar situation before, but today is a new day. It has never been today before and it will not be today tomorrow! Thankfully, I will not eat the same food today that I ate yesterday. It may be similar but the food I ate yesterday is passed. I need new fresh food today. I also need a new fresh word from God for today because **I have not lived this day before**.

In our churches we repeat the same service week after week. We follow a pattern that we have always followed. Hymn, prayer, hymn, reading, hymn, collection, hymn, sermon, hymn, home! Week after week because that is what we have always done. The sermon is twenty minutes because that is how long it always is. “In this church we do not raise our hands or clap with the music. We never have done!” “We cannot remove the pews or the screen, because they were given in memory of a benefactor of the church!” What about the memory of the Living God! It is so easy to get into a rut and lean on yesterday, following the path that we have always taken. Maybe God wants to take us on in a way that we have not been before.

*“Church, Moses is dead!”*

In 1984 the Argentinean evangelist Luis Palau came to London. There was a big mission tent within a few hundred yards from the church that I attended at the time. There was a follow up in West London the following year. It was a great time of growth for the church. If my memory is correct there were 128 people born again into our church. At one time we were holding six separate courses for new Christians, mainly as a result of these mission meetings. The atmosphere and the nature of the meetings were light and informal. Many people not yet saved were coming to the church, and it grieved me that often the pastor would insist on a traditional 1662 Prayer Book service. Gone was the light informal nature of the mission meetings. It seemed that now we had ‘caught them’ we no longer needed the light relaxed meetings. This was not mission, this was church! This is how we do church! I could see people, sometimes friends that I had taken to church, struggling to find the right page or even the right book!

Some say that I should not have done it, but it had the desired effect. I was tired of protesting to the pastor and I suspect he was tired of my protests. Were we making disciples or converting them into ‘our denomination’? One day I had had enough. The pastor was afraid that we would lose some of the ‘traditionalists’ in the church. I was afraid that we would lose those that might otherwise be saved. If the traditionalists were truly saved, then Jesus would not lose them, even if we did.

One day I went into the church and hid every copy of the 1662 Prayer Book. I did not remove them from the church in case it was interpreted as theft. I then phoned the pastor and told him that we would no longer hold these traditional services as I had all the books. The pastor was not very happy and I did put them back in their place before the Sunday service, but the point was made, and on Sundays these traditional services were no longer held.

Tradition is not wrong unless it gets in the way of us being the people that God wants us to be. We hold on to our traditions and our way of doing things. It stops us from joining with others. It causes us to divide from others. Yet Jesus prayed that we should be one.

God continued to speak to Joshua after He said ‘Moses is dead!’ He told Joshua to arise and go over the Jordan. He had to let go of Moses.

Today, many in Joshua’s situation would start a new denomination called “The Church of Moses” and make the life of Moses the centre of their lives. They would separate themselves

from others because 'we are the people of Moses'. 'We have the truth of Moses and you do not'. 'We do things the way Moses did them and so we are the true disciples'. Most denominations today have started in this way. New churches, ministries and denominations are springing up everywhere because we follow a particular teaching or doctrine. Turn on what is called 'Christian Television' and see how many of the television preachers have used their own names as the name of their ministry.

Denominationalism is at the heart of disunity in the Church. I have said that the variety of the denominations is not wrong, but the pride and division of denominations grieves the heart of God. When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church there were not yet denominations, but people were beginning to divide on worldly lines:

*For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?*

*For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?*

*Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?*

In the early church was the seed of division. Today we would have 'The Church of Paul' and 'The Church of Apollos'. It is carnal. It is worldly.

Again we could rewrite these words:

*For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?*

*For when one says, "I am of the Pentecostals," and another, "I am of the Anglican persuasion," are you not carnal?*

*What then is a Methodist, and what is Baptist, but denominations through whom you were taught, but the Lord loves each one?*

In this book I have talked a lot about the division and disunity and strife and envy that exist among Christians and particularly among leaders.

God told Joshua to be strong and courageous three times. "I will never leave you nor forsake you!" God is looking for the strong and courageous church leader who will abandon the ties of denominationalism (not abandon his denomination) and begin to set out on a way that he has not been before. Leave the mistakes of past misunderstanding and keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is only One Church. Recognise your brother. That other church, that pastor, that brother, is not your enemy. He is your co-worker in the kingdom of God.

The world is waiting to see it.

Jesus is praying for it.

*Where brothers dwell together in unity the Lord **commands** the blessing. Life forevermore!*