

*The God Who Goes Before Us*  
Exodus 13.17-22; Matthew 28.1-8  
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In 1926 Jurgen Moltmann was born. You may well have heard his name for he has become a significant Christian theologian in the twentieth century. Your ministers will certainly know of him. Being born in Germany in 1926 it was inevitable that he was drawn into the Hitler youth movement.

In 1943, as a teenager, he saw his home town of Hamburg obliterated by the allied bombers. The next year he was called up, drafted, and fought at Arnhem until in 1945 he was captured by the British. So he had three years, as he put it, to think about the horrors of war and the appalling news coming to light of German crimes against humanity at Auschwitz, Belsen and other places of sinfulness and horror. In a prisoner of war camp in England he faced despair, depression and a sense of deep resignation, a teenager whose personal and national life had been crushed in devastating shame and guilt.

He was not a Christian but a camp chaplain gave him a New Testament. He read it, and read it, and one thing struck him more forcibly than anything else. That was the amazing sense of hope in which these Christians lived and died. They had a hard time of it, undeservedly so. They were persecuted. Like Jesus their Lord, they did not deserve what was done to them. But they remained full of hope, not carried along with empty otherworldly optimistic beliefs that something will turn up, but living hope! In his despair, Moltmann became fascinated by these people and the God of good news.

By the time he returned to Germany in 1948 he was a Christian. He studied the Christian faith and his first book which established his reputation as a notable theologian he entitled "A Theology of Hope". His whole life was changed as he came to trust not human claims to power, which, after all, had left his life in ruins and despair, but the amazing thought that it is out of the future that God is coming, God who is for us, all of us, the God known in Jesus, above all in the undefeatable love of the cross. Hope, a present and future hope, a living hope, was what he discovered personally as he read the New Testament. He became a new person in Christ. Today he remains a person full of Christian love and laughter.

He is not alone, of course. Many have found in the story of God new beginnings, the overcoming of deadly guilt from the past, and life giving challenges to their moods of despair. God our hope, God of our future. It is sometimes tempting in England with our heavy sense of history, and our old buildings as places of worship, to imagine that God's real home is the past. We so value tradition that we can give to the rising and present generation the sense that all this faith business is about yesterday – so we should not be surprised when that is where they chose to leave it. But what if that past is not the whole story?

For all that the people of God are called to remember the rock from which they were hewn, and never to forget what God has done for them in making covenant, the dimension of faith that so struck Jurgen Moltmann remains the

truth. This morning, let us recall the God who is not contained in our past but is the living One, God who goes before us, if you like, the pilgrim God.

Recall our Bible Readings. The first was that part of the story in Exodus, when by the power of God under Moses the people of Israel were making their great escape from slavery. They were led by Moses and by God, by day a pillar of cloud and by night a pillar of fire. Do you get the picture, God always going ahead of his people. God, pioneering the way to the land of promise?

And then there was Matthew's account of the resurrection morning. The women find the tomb empty except for a messenger who tells them that Jesus is not among the dead, he has been there and done that as the saying has it, but now he is risen! Then in the message they are told, specifically, that he is indeed going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him. The risen Christ, ahead of his people.

This is a rich and wonderful aspect of Christian faith and life. Far from being a feature of the past, the object of our nostalgia, God is out there in our future, the God who goes before us. Now, as Moltmann found, there is an excitement in life and all its possibilities. Fear is put in its place, for whatever else we may encounter, the future is filled with God, the God who goes before us.

Let's think about some implications of this truth. Jesus' basic call is, follow me. We have sometimes turned being a Christian into a long list of difficult doctrines we have to believe. But Jesus said, "follow me". Yesterday was the anniversary of my baptism and the text "Follow me" was the one given me by the minister. We are called to follow one who goes before us, who is the way, the truth and the life. No aimless living now, no empty years, but a journey graced by God and full of surprises. Come on, says Jesus, follow me as he goes before us.

Sometimes the society we live in suggests a dullness, a sad inevitability about life. We go to school, we go to work, we marry, raise children, raise a mortgage, we try to keep fit and healthy, we die. No wonder some people can get depressed, wondering what the point of it all is, assuming there is any point to it all.

But supposing the truth is that we are called into the purposes of God for all creation, to affirm here and now God's kingdom in the face of false assumptions that all this a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Our life has a significance we cannot measure. It comes not as a burden to be endured but an adventure to be explored – following the gracious calling God who goes before us! Whatever our age, there is an excitement in our life with Christ.

The God who goes before us. Do you know that the most frequent command of God in the Bible is "Fear not! Do not be afraid!" God repeats that more than anything else. Nothing falls outside the love and gracious care of God and so we have hope, hope where otherwise there is only emptiness, hope even in death.

Death has touched our lives here at Park Road this week. It is something to which we all will come and none of us quite knows what it holds. It is understandable that we are apprehensive.

But the God we know in Jesus has been even been to the tomb before us. He has gone through what it is to die and be dead. And going before us he has pioneered a new and living way in what most of our contemporaries think is the ultimate hopeless situation. We shall come to meet our death but God has gone before us, so even as I walk through a valley dark as death I will fear no evil, for God is with me. "Fear not, do not be afraid", commands the God who goes before us.

And the meaning is even more immediate. What have you got in your diary for this coming week? For some it is still holidays but for many work calls. There is a small Baptist Church in Edinburgh, Scotland, that has a great tradition of keeping Holy Week and Easter. Every night the vast majority of the members gather for about an hour's devotion, following closely the passion story of Jesus. Eventually they come to the resurrection morning and celebrate the good news in high praise.

Easter Monday is not a holiday in Scotland as it is in England, so back to work the employees must go. But the church still lives the story. So they gather early on Monday and those not going to work cook breakfast for the others. They read together that story of Jesus having breakfast with the disciples on the lake side. They found Jesus back at work, the God who was there before them.

You may have some tough experiences before you this week, some visit you must make, some interviews or meeting you must attend which you are already beginning to feel just a little anxious about. But what if Christ is there ahead of you? No if or buts, that is the truth for us! Off to work you go, and don't be surprized if you find Christ there. After all, he is already where he wants you to be.

You know me enough by now to know that I am not given to easy pieties but let me tell you about my Aunt Ruby? She died just two years ago, well into her nineties. She lived in the old large family home, for her last fifteen years on her own. Well, that is not strictly true because she was much given to the giving of hospitality and there were always visiting friends, missionaries needing a rest, families she had heard about who could do with a break that she had invited to stay. But sometimes she was on her own and the family grew anxious about her in that big house. She thanked us for our concern but simply told us to have faith in God. She did have the good sense, when it became too difficult for her to care for herself, to ask for help, thank God. A very sensible elderly lady, Aunt Ruby.

But one memory I have is a treasure because it gave me a glimpse into the secret of her lovely life. I was preaching at the church where she was a member and strangely Jenny and I were the only ones staying with her Sunday night. When we came back to the house after the evening service she stood at the door and rang the bell, just to give the burglars time to get out, she said with a smile. Then she put her key in the lock and pushed the door open. Quietly she whispered, "After you, Lord" and then she went in.

What a perspective on life, life for a pilgrim people! After you, Lord. God who goes before us, through all the changing scenes of life, calling us and holding us for ever in undefeatable love. Fear not, do not be afraid, I am with you always, even just a little ahead of you, where ever you go.

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Go before us, O God, in all our doings with your most gracious providence, that in all our works, begun, continued and ended in you, we may in all things glorify your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.