

BOLDNESS

(Numbers 14.1-25)

I've been given the title "Boldness" for today's talk.

Whenever I hear that word, I think of Star Trek; the voyage of the Star Ship Enterprise – whose 5-year mission was to explore strange new worlds, seek out new life and new civilizations, and boldly go where no man had gone before."

I used to wonder about that. I mean, if they *really* were literally going where no one had ever gone before, why did they keep bumping into people, every week in fact, who spoke perfect English?

Anyway, if you've been away over the summer, we've been going through the Books of Exodus and Numbers, which describe the journey of the Israelites, not through the final frontier of space, but from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.

It's not that far. At 4 mph, it should have taken them about three weeks. It took them 40... *years*.

So, if you think Virgin trains are bad...

Up until this point in the story, God has been doing a lot of liberating and providing – and the Israelites have been doing a lot of moaning and complaining.

- They grumble about their food,
- they grumble about the lack of water,
- they grumble about Moses' leadership,
- they grumble about their conditions.

It says, "they grumbled in their tents."

Now, I hate camping. I find it amazing that anyone actually spends money on camping holidays. That, to me, is like paying to get slapped with a wet fish.

The Israelites were not able to wash properly for months and had to eat off paper plates - and that's horrible - but if there was an Olympic sport of whingeing these Israelites would win the gold medal.

In a way, grumbling and complaining is the opposite of faith. Basically, it's a comment on what we think of God and the dumb way he is running the universe. I need to remember that every time I feel like a good moan.

In the bit just before today's story, 12 men go on a reconnaissance mission into the Promised Land. All 12 report back that it is flowing with milk and honey, just as God had promised.

But despite the fact that God had said that they would definitely take possession of it, 10 spies out of 12 didn't believe it.

In life, you will always find naysayers. "We can't do it!" "We tried that before!" Or Fraser in Dad's Army; "We're doomed!"

But when you see life with the eyes of faith the impossible looks possible.

10 out of 12 say, "It can't be done." They poison the atmosphere with negativity. "It will never work!" "It's hopeless!"

Negativity is infectious. People listen to what they say and start wailing. "If only we had died in Egypt!" they say. "It would be better if we just die of thirst here in the desert." "Let's choose another leader and go back to Egypt and be slaves again."

Who are the naysayers today? There are plenty of voices grinding us down. "God is as real as the tooth fairy." "The church is in terminal decline." "Christians are bad for society."

30 years ago, it was the Bishop of Durham, who should have been on our side, pooh-poohing the resurrection. 20 years ago, it was the Da Vinci Code. 10 years ago, it was The God Delusion. We're due another popular attack on Christian faith about now.

You who were baptized today, for the rest of your life you will hear scoffers and cynics telling you what a load of rubbish it all is.

But ...

2 of the 12 spies, Joshua and Caleb, stand against the wave of unbelief and negativity and say, "Wait a minute! The land we explored is exceedingly good, it's flowing with milk and honey. The Lord will lead us into that land, and he will give it to us. Do not be afraid because the Lord is with us."

Just two positive voices getting drowned out by a national chorus of boos and hisses.

We who are baptized, are called to speak up like they did and say, "Wait a minute..."

In some parts of the world today that comes at a very, very heavy cost.

At the New Wine conference this month, there was an amazing interview with a North Korean Christian called Hea Woo, who escaped to the West a few years ago.

In North Korea you share your faith at immense personal risk. Her husband was found out and was shot dead before her eyes with no trial.

Hea Woo spent time in prison. But she said, with a radiant smile on her face, "In that horrible place, the Lord was in my heart, and my heart was at peace. I saw the worst of humanity but the best of Jesus Christ. While I was tortured I heard God's voice and remembered the suffering of Christ."

It's a capital offence to own a Bible there, so North Korean Christians bury them in the garden and read them secretly in the middle of the night. Fearing her Bible might one day be discovered and destroyed, she wrote out *the whole Bible* by hand as a backup.

Why did she endure all that? Because she had met Jesus, he changed her life and she could never look back.

Let me tell you another story from this country and then I'll sit down. It's about a guy named Earl who inherited a lot of money. He had so much money he did not need to work ever again. He wasted his family fortune every day on all kinds of drugs, including heroin.

At the age of thirty he ended up in hospital. Someone came to visit him in hospital and gave him a New Testament. He was thrilled. Why? Because the paper was very thin so it was ideal for rolling joints. He rolled his way through Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels.

But when he came to John's Gospel, he started reading. As a result of reading the words of John's Gospel, he encountered Jesus and became a Christian. He was filled with joy.

The psychologist in charge of his case was a very beautiful young woman, who had been a model. One day, she said to Earl, "Look, I have it all – success, beauty and endless qualifications – but I am not fulfilled. Your life is a mess, yet you seem to have something – you're at peace and you radiate with joy. What is it?"

He led her to faith in Jesus Christ. Later, they were married. Now he's a vicar. Two lives changed by God. All over the world, lives are changing because of Jesus Christ. He's alive!

So, in a world of grumbling voices and naysaying voices, remember that God is at work, mending broken lives, bringing people together and sustaining people going through the worst things imaginable.

That's something to be bold about.