

I suspect that it is no accident that we consistently misremember God's first words to humanity as 'go forth.' Even in the King James Bible, where one might expect such a phrase to be chiselled, the words are not 'go forth' but 'Be fruitful.' However, with the benefit of hindsight, having heard the whole story, seen the film to the end and endured the opera till the final chorus, when we collectively recall 'go forth' we are remembering the beginning as it actually should be from our privileged perspective of a front row seat at the end.

Opening lines are important, because they need to grab our attention and if your audience isn't hooked at that moment, they'll soon swim off someplace else.

Now is the winter of our discontent...

If music be the food of love...

The past is a foreign country...

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth

But it's a mistake to obsess about something at the start of the story, because the whole point of it is it's the beginning, not the end, it's there to grab your attention and reel you in like the stupid jokes and charming dog stories that usually start these sermons. Opening words are the beginning of the tale and we never expect a story to end the same way it begins: that way nothing changes and it isn't a story, it's just somebody reading out the lines they've just been made to write out fifty times.

I must pay more attention in RE lessons...

I must pay more attention in RE...

I must pay more att...squirrel! ention in RE...

That said, the very first words God spoke to humanity really *should* be 'go forth', because you may as well start as you mean to carry on, and 'Go forth' is what he's been saying to us ever since.

All through the history of salvation, from Genesis to Revelation, God calls his people forward. A peripatetic, pilgrim people, wandering Arameans with nowhere to lay their heads, God's people have always been on the move. Not Brownian motion random aimlessly wandering, not ants-in-your-pants restlessness, but purposeful, directed onward movement. From the pillar of cloud at the Red Sea to the itinerant preacher by the sea of Galilee, God's call has always been 'follow me'. Follow me *forward*.

Which is precisely *not* human default mode. Human default mode is something like: as soon as we reach somewhere that feels, sort of right, when the going gets easy or at least familiar, then get the driver to pull over, unpack the luggage and crying 'at last!

we got here', spread out the picnic mat, crack out the packed lunch then settle down for a nap, ignoring the voices from the less comfortable seats at the back of the bus saying 'are we nearly there yet? Because this doesn't look like somewhere we ought to be stopping to *me*.' This is not a game of statues. No prizes in the salvation race for standing still; birds have their nests, foxes have their holes but the people of God have nowhere to lay their heads. They are always on the move, and only ever in the same direction.

*'An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth'*

God tells Moses in Exodus. We can would be rightly horrified at the crudeness and brutality of Biblical justice. Yet what for us is cruel and primitive was for Moses original audience a huge step forward. This is advanced justice that is enlightened and proportional. An eye for an eye, rather than a life for an eye. God has taken his people forward.

And later Jesus takes them further still.

*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;*

You will often hear said something along the lines of, 'the Church has been teaching this for 2000 years, you can't change that!' But of course you can, and of course, as Christians we must. If we *don't* then we've unwittingly retired from the race, ground to a halt in a less-than-salubrious lay-by having convinced ourselves that we've actually reached the beach. No rest for the wicked; and even less for those who want to be good.

For the ancient Israelites in Egypt, for the first fisherman disciples this movement was physical and literal, but the forward movement was for them, and for us, in many other ways too.

The scene we hear described in the Gospel today seems, at first glance, to be entirely contradicting this picture of a relentless onward march.

For a start, it's partly all about tradition: dragging mother, father, child and some very short life expectancy pigeons to the Temple to perform the time-immemorial thanksgiving rite. There's been hundreds of years of first borns making the same journey before Jesus did; uncountable coops of feathered friends making their last journey as smoke rising up to heaven. It's not exactly cutting edge. The only thing missing is the collected aunties and uncles and cousins and friends cooing over a small human that looks for all the world like Winston Churchill and trying and failing to follow the service booklet.

And Simeon's response to the arrival of the holy family? Well it looks for all the world like what happens when a new Rector arrives in the parish after a long vacancy and a great sigh of relief goes up from the doers and shakers: 'finally we can lay down our burdens; there's someone else to do it now.' This is a near universal response but, how shall we put this, not the right one. I think you know that now. Anyway, there are differences. Simeon is not coming off the rota to enjoy a retirement pottering around in his garden and watching repeats of Bargain Hunt. On the contrary he has been given permission to make the biggest step forward that any of us will ever make. Laying down in peace means he'll finally be dying after a lifetime of waiting. And the other difference, of course, is that the new Rector, no matter how charming she is, is not the Messiah. But then you already know *that*.

So, though the scene in the Temple looks like business as usual, stagnant enough that even a columnist on the Daily Mail would approve, it's not. Under the surface calm, the swan is going ten to the dozen. Salvation is sprinting, and God's people are once again moving forward. What can look like standing still, what can look like same old same old isn't always. BCP Evensong might seem like you've been stuck in a tailback for centuries, but that's because you're spending your time gazing out the car window looking down at the road; and it's been tarmac for the last thousand miles, and all tarmac looks the same; but when you lift up your gaze and look ahead, you've been hurtling forward all along. As a pioneer of faith, you're not always building the road you're travelling on.

The thing about salvation is it doesn't arrive ready formed: it would be much easier if it did, but it doesn't instead, it unfolds. The infant Simeon held in his arms was, yes, the full and final revelation of God; but also that revelation unfolded over the next thirty-three years; and the next, and the next and the next, and still is revealing its secrets, casting light into places we hadn't noticed before; changing as any thing that grows changes.

Trying to understand God, we are moving towards a distant object and the closer we are the more detail we can see. Now we see through a glass darkly but the more time we spend looking, praying, moving, the less opaque that glass becomes.

God moves us forward, inch by inch, bit by bit, step by step. Our vision becomes more and more filled with the light that bathed Simeon's eyes.

Yes, Bishops. We will leave old perspectives, old visions, old truths and certainties behind. As we move forward to better ones.