

ANGLICAN PARISH OF ST CUTHBERT'S, TWEED HEADS

17th Sunday after Pentecost – 1st October 2017

Exodus 17.1-7

Today the story of the Exodus continues as the Israelites make their way through the wilderness. The story of the Exodus is a foundational story for the people of Israel, and indeed for the whole people of God. In these years of wilderness wandering, on their way to the land God has promised them, the people are learning what it means to be led by God and what it means to depend wholly on God and to trust God in whatever situation they find themselves.

During these years and on this journey their identity as a nation and as God's people is being forged. But what is also being made clear to them is the nature of the God they are following. After the Exodus journey, when they sought to speak about God, it was as much in terms of what God had done for them as it was in terms of the nature and being of God. God was described as the One who with mighty hand and outstretched arm led the people from slavery to freedom. The phrase "with a strong hand and an outstretched arm" became a formula in the Jewish tradition to represent God's use of his power on their behalf.

But they were not always as confident about the presence and the power of God. This was a hard-won lesson for them, as we see in today's episode of the story. The grumbling and complaining Israelites, having escaped the Egyptians at the Red Sea, having received the divine gift of water, quail and manna in response to their demanding in the desert, are now again faced with the prospect of death by thirst. And they are not happy.

This passage is one of the "murmuring stories" in this Exodus account. Murmuring stories have been referred to as stories of Israel's "dissatisfaction or anger which is

expressed by subdued, often inarticulate, and always resentful complaint". So great was the murmuring and complaint this time that the place where they were standing took on the identity of this anger and dissatisfaction. Moses referred to it as "Massah" and "Meribah", the place of "quarrelling" and "testing".

This testing goes in several directions. It is directed towards Moses but also towards God. Moses is tested as their leader, and questions why they are "quarrelling" with him. It is a test of his own leadership, as well as a testing of God. It is not merely the fact that the people can find no water in this place. They claim that there has been some sort of a conspiracy on the part of Moses and they accuse him of bringing them out of slavery in Egypt simply to kill them, their children, and all their animals. It is an extraordinary accusation, but these are desperate times and they are distressed and not thinking clearly.

Their greatest trial however is not lack of water.

This murmuring story is constructed around a number of questions:

"Why were we brought out of Egypt?"

"Did we go out of Egypt to die in the desert?" the people ask.

In other words - "What has all of this been for?" "What is going to happen to us?"

"What is the point of our so-called freedom if we've come out here to die?"

Moses turns to the Lord: "What shall I do?" he asks. "They're going to kill me."

And finally the central question in the story – the crux of the whole matter is the question: "Is the Lord among us or not?"

This is a test and a quarrel, but it is much more than that. The traditional way to read the word for "quarrel" is "lawsuit". To understand it in this way raises the stakes somewhat. It is no longer a mere complaint; it is no longer just a quarrel; it is a

formal confrontation. Questions have been raised that need to be answered, accusations made that require a response. Moses, however, has no answers. No response is possible for him.

So Moses turns to God, and in response to their ridiculous indictment of Moses' motives, God responds, telling Moses to strike the rock with his rod and water will gush forth from the rock. Moses does so, and the people have water to drink.

In this miraculous drawing forth of water from the rock we see at least two things: Firstly, Israel was not set free from slavery for death in the wilderness. God can be trusted.

Secondly, their freedom means that while they are no longer slaves in Egypt, dependent on their Egyptian slave masters, they are dependent on God, and just as they could not live without Egyptian favour in Egypt, so now they cannot live without the divine favour of God. They must trust God.

The issue in this story is not the faith of Israel. The issue is the reliability of God and their ability to trust. It is not a question of whether they believe in God, but whether they can trust God to be *their* God. When things go pear-shaped they do not, to their credit, say "there is no God!", as many will do after them. But they do begin to question God's presence *with them*. "Is the Lord among us or not?"

In fact, they start to question whether God has been with them from the beginning. Their question to Moses "why did *you* bring us out of Egypt?" ignores the fact that it is God who has brought them out by a miraculous divine intervention. This complaint that it *Moses* who brought them out of Egypt cannot be made without explaining away the plagues, the Passover, the parting of the sea, the manna from heaven, the water from the rock.

It would not, however, be the last time that these miracles were explained away, attributed to other factors and not to God. For example, according to scientific reasoning, the burning bush was caused by a burning layer of turf under the soil that caused the bush to burst into flame. The plagues were the result of natural phenomena. The parting of the sea was a *meteorological* phenomenon, caused by a strong wind. The manna from heaven was an *entomological* phenomenon, the result of insect activity. The water from the rock was a *geological* phenomenon, in that soft porous limestone can retain lots of water within it, and the striking of the rock created a fissure through which the water escaped. It's a little bit like what Revd Rachel been saying about miracles – some recognise the extraordinary and the miraculous where others only see the ordinary and the logical or scientific explanation.

Can science explain these miracles? How are we, along with these ancient people of God, to know for certain that God is with us, that God is near us, listening to us, among us? Can we trust God as we cry out to God in our need and in the face of unanswered prayer?

Did the people start trusting again because they witnessed yet another miracle? Even after all they have seen and experienced, they still doubt, they still fail to trust, they still seek alternative answers to their God questions. In the psalm today all the miracles God has performed on their behalf are listed, and yet the psalm ends with these words: “But for all this they sinned yet more against him; and rebelled against the Most High in the desert.” The miraculous cannot form the criterion for our trust in God.

We cannot be offered rock-solid proof that God is with us. Some claim healings as signs that God is with us, yet even that is problematic. What of the ones who are not

healed? Is God with some and not with others? When, two and a half years ago, against all the odds, our daughter-in-law went into remission from her leukaemia and became eligible for a bone marrow transplant, I praised God for a miracle of healing. Yet just over a year after the transplant, she died. Was her remission a miracle of medical science or a miracle of God? And if a miracle of God, why didn't she live?

If a church grows and flourishes, does that mean that God is with them and not with the small congregation of 25-30? Or is it because the ministers are charismatic, the location is prime, and the worship suits the needs of the congregation?

We cannot place our trust in unexplainable acts that may or may not have divine origin. We must place our trust in God alone.

Last Sunday Rev'd Rachel talked about nostalgia – about our tendency to look back and view the past through rose-coloured glasses, and in doing so run the risk of not recognising the blessings of the present and of losing sight of a vision for the future.

Our failure to trust leaves us in a similar limbo. When the people of Israel started questioning whether God was in their presence, they lost sight of all that God had done for them, the miracles God had performed on their behalf, their salvation from Egyptian slavery and the promises God made for their future. Because they failed to trust that God would do as he said, they began to feel lost, cast adrift, alone, helpless, uncertain and fearful of the future.

How difficult it is to trust God unconditionally. Even Jesus, who trusted God so completely throughout his entire life, when he faced his greatest moment of testing on the cross, felt forsaken.

Yet every good relationship needs to be built on trust. Marriage is the ultimate example, and in the Scriptures our relationship with God is sometimes spoken of in terms of marriage. God is with us for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health – regardless of whether we witness miraculous healing or no obvious answer at all to our prayers in times of sickness or death; whether the way through is made easy for us or we continue to experience trial and struggle; whether blessing is rained from heaven or we go on suffering great need; whether we live or whether we die; and even if we die then we can still say, “Surely, the Lord is among us!”

Let us pray.

God of the Exodus,

help us to trust you even when we face times of challenge, need and testing.

Give us the assurance that in whatever lies ahead,

you are among us.

Amen.