

Lent 3
27/03/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 17:1 - 7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1 - 11

John 4:5 – 30, 39 - 45

The water that is life

The stories we focus on in Lent are foundational for understanding faith and life. On the first Sunday in Lent we began with the story of the Fall that seeks to help us understand the situation in which we find ourselves as humans. Last week, out of a history of disappointing events that ended in the Tower of Babel, God called Abraham and Sarah to be the founders of a new community of faith and blessing for the world. This was a breathtaking venture of faith that created a pilgrim people: a people on the way.

This week we heard that: “*The Israelites journeyed by stages as the Lord commanded* (Ex 17:1).” Many generations later, as the community founded on God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah suffered under the difficulties of its journey through the Wilderness it had to grapple in depth with the meaning of its life under God. Israel targeted Moses with its grumbling, and wrestled with a residual temptation to put God to the test.

The wilderness stories are metaphors that speak of what life is like for people who make the journey between promise and fulfilment. In the Wilderness Israel was a community on the move from an act of redemption towards the promised goal. These words have a familiar ring because they appear in the Basis of Union of the UCA. We are a pilgrim people: our church makes a direct association between the people in Exodus and ourselves. Like them we are on a journey, which begins with a gracious, life-filled act of redemption that is a sign of the promised end: God’s decision to finally gather everything together into a community of reconciliation. Our pilgrimage is to live towards God and to translate what that means into our way of life.

Living towards God does not always mean we move directly from oasis to oasis. The Wilderness is a threatening, challenging place, a place of lifelessness and chaos. It is also a place of unexpected refreshment in the grace of God. There is a difference between promise and fulfilment. When hope is delayed or derailed it is easy to lose sight of the direction and purpose of the journey. When we become stuck at a particular place and struggle over the meaning of what is happening to us, the wilderness can become a mindset that afflicts us: a place of self-pity and hardness of heart which adds up to a lack of faith and the denial of grace.

There are two things that give shape to the part of the journey in our reading today: one is grace, the other is grumbling. Grumbling is connected with Massah and Meribah – “test and quarrel” the names given to the place of thirst. The names are not memorials to the grace of God. They are perpetual reminders of the human capacity to grumble about God and put God to the test where even so, their thirst was quenched.

But do they believe? It seems not. Once before they had complained of hunger (Ch 16:4) and there was provision. But this experience made no difference when a new crisis arose. They asked: Is God with us or not? The question itself is bad enough, but there is a much worse problem. The people put God to the test. At Massah and Meribah Israel tried to make belief in God contingent on a demonstration of God's presence. They tried to find a way of coercing God into acting on their terms, and in doing so showed themselves to have forgotten whose they were, and the meaning of God's gracious acts towards them.

What happens in Exodus 17 is exactly parallel with the second temptation of Jesus in Matthew (Ch 4:5-7) where the Tempter took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and said: "*If you are the Son of God throw yourself down, for it is written: he will command his angels concerning you, and on their hands they will bear you up*". Jesus replied from the Wilderness tradition: (Deut 6:16) – "do not put your God to the test". In other words: don't try to coerce God into action. Don't try to prove God's power and presence on your own terms and make that the basis of your faith (Fretheim *Exodus*, p 189). There are many people who have given up the faith because God did not act in the way they believed God should have done. Their child died, their son got killed in the war, or their mother left them when they were too young. There are people who avoid responsibility in life because of a naïve idea that "the Lord will undertake". Such an approach does not allow God to be God. It puts God at our beck and call and turns faith in into sight.

The second key feature in this passage is the name Horeb, the name of the rock Moses struck. Horeb (sometimes called Sinai) refers to the mountain where God would give Moses the law. Not only did God call Moses, and promise deliverance, on the journey God provided a structure for living that would help carry them through their life on the way. This law was not a burden it was a gift of grace. It represented God's presence to guide and resource community life through the gift of the Word. Water and word go together in this story as refreshing sources of life for a community of grumblers who had few resources to rely on as they moved through a thirsty land.

Finding water in such a way is known in the region, but here it is the creative act of God that led Moses to the place, quelling the his panic. And this for a grumbling, faithless people. This is an illustration of what Paul was talking about when he said: *the proof of God's amazing love is this, that while we were sinners, Christ died for us ...* This is the doctrine of justification at work: which means that God who is judge, acquits the guilty – a complete reversal of what we would expect by human standards.

Massah and Meribah memorialise the rebellion of the people, but Horeb tells us that deeper needs than those that were preoccupying the people are being graciously met. Here is water associated with the living Word, the promised presence of God that wells up to give eternal life. This funny old story about a grumpy bunch of people who had become trapped in a negative, faithless mindset is about how they unexpectedly – undeservedly - found themselves refreshed in a very hard place.

We have all drunk water, but many have never really tasted it. One who did was Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the pioneer French aviator. He once had to bring his aeroplane down in the Sahara desert. Days passed and he was close to dying of thirst. At last, out of the sands, came a solitary Bedouin. From the skin he carried, the desert nomad gave him water. Saint-Exupery spoke of the water he drank as the water that is 'not necessary to life, but rather life itself. (Pridmore, *The Word is Near You*, p 98).

In the desert the Rock broke at God's command to bring forth living water for an ungrateful people. At Jacob's Well Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman broke the rules. He gave her the gift of himself and something broke into her life so that it was never the same again. A man in search of a drink poured the Holy Spirit into her heart. This is God's undistinguishing regard for Adam's fallen race, shown forth as sufficient, sovereign, saving grace. It was not the attractiveness of its object that caused this to flow. It came from the essential nature of God whose heart overflows with love for the world, regardless of how the world feels about God. That is why on Easter morning, when all seems dark and lost, Christians celebrate the wonder of how God opened the rock that held love in death. God did this so that all people may see this is not just a life. This is the source of life itself. Because of that life for us need never be the same again.
