

Exodus 17: 1-7
Third Sunday in Lent

15.03.20

Thirsting for God

Well, there they go again. Those ungrateful, faithless Israelites doing what they seemed to do best, grumbling and whining and complaining, and it seems there was always something to moan about. In the previous chapter of Exodus it was food they were banging God's ear about – 'we're hungry and there's nothing to eat!' - and now it's water. When do you think these Israelites are going to learn to trust God? When are they going to learn to have a little faith? After all, hadn't God just parted the sea so that they could escape the Egyptians? And hadn't God responded to their grumbles about bread by sending them manna from heaven? When are they going to get the message? God cares for them. God's going to look after them. God's going to meet their needs. And poor God. What the good Lord has to put up with! There must have been times when the divine patience was stretched to breaking point and God must have regretted rescuing the Israelites. Maybe God should have just left them back in Egypt, under the Pharaoh's lash.

Well, of course that is the easy way of looking at it – blame the Israelites for their bad behaviour. But maybe we can sympathise with these Israelites just a bit. Have you ever been really, really thirsty – thirsty so that your mouth is parched and dry and your lips cracked? Have you ever experienced the burning, stifling heat of the desert and seen that your water is running out and you're having to ration it, and then the children start crying and you cannot stand that? Your own thirst is bad enough, but dear God, spare the children. Maybe the Israelites deserve a little understanding. Indeed maybe they deserve even more understanding because actually what is at issue here is not just water, or lack of it. That is bad enough, but it seems there is an ever deeper fear lurking here, an even worse possibility than the absence of water. And that is the absence of God. If we read the passage carefully it seems that underlying the immediate presenting issue of 'where is water?' lies the even more troubling issue of 'where is God?' It's not just the presence of water but the presence of God that is at stake. So just listen again to how the passage ends: 'Moses called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'is the Lord among us or not?' That's the real question! Out here in this desolate, rock-strewn, barren desert, is the Lord here with us or not? And yes, maybe the Israelites should have trusted that God was there. Certainly the writer of Psalm 95 with which we began our service this morning thought so. The writer of Psalm 95 is pretty hard on these Israelites: 'Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.'

I want, however, to put in a word for the Israelites here. Their grumpiness was not just due to stubbornness. Their grumbling at Moses was not just due to a whinging disposition, and nor was it just down to low blood sugar levels in the absence of Coca Cola machines in the desert. No, their complaining was born out of fear, the terrible fear that God had deserted them. They were frightened because they wanted God there with them and there didn't seem to be much sign of God. And maybe God understands that, because God does not punish them for their grumbling. God does not throw fire-bolts down from heaven. God hears and God graciously responds. Moses is commanded to take hold of his staff and suddenly in this dry, desolate landscape water gushes from a rock. And the people drink and their thirst for water is slaked. But so too is their thirst for God, for there God is, at the rock. And I love the way another version of the Bible translates verse 6 so that it reads, 'you will find me waiting for you there.' I love those words! There is the sublime promise of the God of grace: in this dry and barren place 'you will find me waiting for you there'. And they did.

In this passage, therefore, water is inextricably bound up with God's refreshing, life-giving presence – and thirst becomes a cipher for a yearning, a longing for that presence. 'As the deer pants for the water, so my soul yearns for you' says Psalm 42. And in the Easter season that will be upon us soon we recall Jesus on the cross, and what is it that Jesus says? What words are on his lips as he prepares to die? 'After this, Jesus, aware that all had now come to its appointed end, said in

fulfilment of Scripture, ‘I am thirsty’.’ And a sponge is filled with wine and held to his lips, but the thirst that Jesus speaks of here goes much, much deeper. Here is Jesus right to the end thirsting for God, thirsting for the sustaining presence of God.’

But what of us, today in our secular 21st century? Are we thirsty for God? So I ask myself that question: with my theological studies and my academic degrees and my position as minister of the English Reformed Church... am I thirsty for God? Are you? I don’t think our society and our culture in what we generally and vaguely call ‘the West’ is very thirsty for God. We don’t see much sign of it and I wonder why. Maybe it is because, on the whole, we are relatively comfortable and at ease. Maybe the world of consumerism and plenty inevitably takes the edge off our spiritual thirst, if not eradicating it entirely. Why is it that in much poorer parts of the world churches are packed and the faith thriving while we, in our relative plenty, see steep decline and indifference, if not outright hostility?

The poet T S Eliot famously took our Old Testament story this morning of the Israelites in the desert as an image for contemporary life – picturing our materialistic world from which God has been banished as a waterless wasteland in which we wander. As he wrote:

If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only...
But there is no water...

And maybe that is an image for our militantly secular world, with the desert of consumerism, and the desert of violence and war, and the desert of poverty and injustice, and now the desert of disease surrounding and entrapping us. And we might find ourselves asking of such a world, ‘Is the Lord in our midst or not?’ But what good if he is, and if there is indeed water, the water of life – but we are not thirsty? This takes us back to Jesus. Lent is of course the season when Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness fasting, and we are told that after forty days he was hungry, and no doubt very thirsty. And as with the Israelites in the desert that hunger and that thirst became a kind of a symbol of his hunger and thirsting after God. Indeed maybe this is the true purpose of Jesus’ fasting and the discipline of fasting generally, that our craving for food and drink might become fused with a craving for God, that even as our bodies yearn for food so our souls yearn for God. Maybe that is the real point of fasting – to arouse in us an appetite for God - and whatever else we do in Lent this should be our deep prayer, that we might hunger and thirst for God in a way that can never be satisfied and God will keep us ever thirsty!

lastly, however, maybe we do thirst for God. Maybe we are not numbed by our materialism and the desert of the modern world, but the problem is that God doesn’t seem to be here. Maybe we are like the Israelites, asking ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’ Maybe like them we fear that God has deserted us, for we feel God’s absence - and maybe you know something about that. Maybe there are times when you have encountered the desert, the wasteland that is God’s absence, God’s silence. There are doubtless some today, faced with this coronavirus crisis, who are asking, ‘Is the Lord among us?’ Is this divine judgement? Perhaps like the Israelites we have had evidence of God’s presence with us in the past and we may even have great stories to tell. But sometimes that is not quite enough to sustain us here and now. And it may be tragedy that strikes, or it may be doubts that assail us, or it may be temptation that grips us and there is something of the desert about our lives. And so that voice persists, ‘is the Lord in our midst or not?’ ‘Is God here?’ But the reason we ask is because we do yearn for God. The reason we question God is because we do long for God and we are haunted by his absence precisely because deep down we thirst for his presence.

Well, let me finish with this. The Israelites feared God’s absence but they found God waiting for them at the rock, which Moses smote and the water burst forth. And if the season of lent

is about wilderness, and desert and God's absence, then don't forget that it ends with Easter Sunday, that glorious morning when God smote that rock which sealed that tomb and the water of life came gushing out. And if the cry of Lent is 'Is the Lord in our midst or not?', then the promise of Easter is, 'you will find me waiting for you there'. And always that is the promise to those who thirst for God and seek him. Always that is the promise to those who feel the desert of God's absence. Somewhere, somehow we will meet God. Somewhere, somehow the dry rock will split and we will taste water. Somewhere, somehow the promise will come true, 'you will find me waiting for you.' Amen.