

Water from the rock

Memory is sometimes a strange thing.

Sometimes people have short memories.

And sometimes people's memories become a bit selective.

In today's reading from Exodus, we find the Israelites complaining. "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" they demanded of Moses.

Why indeed had Moses brought them out of Egypt into this wilderness where they were thirsty? Well, we know why. And the Israelites knew why too. Remember the first chapters of the book of Exodus, where we read: So [the Egyptians] put slave masters over [the Israelites] to oppress them with forced labour... and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labour the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly. (Exodus 1:11-14)

The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. (Exodus 2:23-24)

But why had Moses brought them to this point? Because they'd cried out to God to save them. And save them, God had: At this point, God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, walked them across a sea on dry land, and destroyed Pharaoh's army; it would seem that they should know better!

But things weren't going well at the moment, and they were confronted with a problem – and, let's be fair, being in a desert without water is a real problem – but rather than crying out to God... they complained to Moses. Why have you led us into these circumstances? "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"

It's easy for us to judge the Israelites harshly. Why didn't they trust God? Why didn't, when they were confronted with a problem, ask God for help? Why instead would they blame Moses for their predicament? We'd never do such things, would we?

Perhaps the Israelites had selective memories and were looking back on the good old days in Egypt – not remembering the harsh treatment or the infanticide, but remembering instead the good things about their lives as slaves – they knew their place in society, they were told where they would live, what they would wear, what and when they would eat, and so in. All good things! But all of that was provided to them was by the slave masters. So, although a slave may not have been able to share a home with his family, he knew that he would have a place to sleep. Though a slave may not have liked the food, he knew he would be fed. That has been the only life the Israelites have ever known – for generations.

And, you know, excluding the brutal treatment, perhaps it wasn't so bad... we often look back on the good old days with rose-coloured glasses, don't we?

Because now, they had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, but they found themselves wandering in the wilderness. And this isn't the modern day romantic notion of wilderness where you might go on a glamping holiday – this was somewhere you really wouldn't be. The harsh, stony, dry, Desert of Sin. In this wilderness, where would they find enough food and water? Something they knew for generations in Egypt – in the 'good old days' – couldn't be counted on anymore. And as the Israelites' stomachs began to rumble and their mouths grew dry, they start to grumble against Moses,

wondering if he had just brought them out of Egypt to die in the middle of nowhere. Now that God through Moses had brought them out of slavery, they were wondering why God through Moses isn't continuing to take care of them.

But they didn't go to God with their complaint. They started complaining to Moses. They felt they had put their trust in a faulty leader who had led them in the wrong direction. After all, God hadn't promised them a dry, desert land with no food and water. God had promised them a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8)! How could they ever be hungry or thirsty in such a place? But here they were in a dry, stony desert. So the Israelites did what we all do when we are tired, hungry, thirsty, and feeling lost, they started complaining and finding someone to blame.

When life isn't going the way we think it ought to be going, we start to wonder if God is really with us, much less listening to our prayers. And then the complaining starts. But we don't usually complain to God, do we? We find others to blame – leaders, the government, presbytery or whoever.

For some reason, we seldom complain to God. Maybe we're too polite? Maybe we think God won't have time for our concerns. But people have complained to God throughout the ages. Psalm 22 begins "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" – that's not the prayer of someone who's being polite: It's the prayer of someone who's challenging God! And it's the prayer of Jesus from the cross.

Psalm 88 is even harsher – in it the Psalmist cries out to God:

³ I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death.

⁶ You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.

⁸ You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them.

I am confined and cannot escape;

¹⁴ Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me.

¹⁸ You have taken from me friend and neighbour — darkness is my closest friend. (Psalm 88 3,6,8,14,16,18)

How often do we pray like that today? How often do we share that sort of anguish with God? How would it be if I called us to worship on a Sunday morning with "Our God, our God, why have you forsaken us?"

Instead of sharing our anguish, our disappointment, our pain with God, we project it on to each other. God had delivered the people out of slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea on dry land, protected them with the pillar of fire and the column of cloud but the people said it wasn't enough. Moses was not doing enough for them. Moses, who had reluctantly become the leader of the Israelites, but had faithfully led and served his people just as God called him, was now faced with a bunch of whiny, angry, tired, thirsty, hungry, and disappointed people.

Why did they do this to him? They could have turned to God, but they decided to blame Moses instead. Moses could have reminded them of the bad times in Egypt, reminded them of the suffering there, reminded them of the deliverance that God had given them... but he didn't. He could have defended himself: "Don't blame me! I only did what God had asked'... but he didn't.

Instead, when Moses began hearing the complaints of the people, he went straight to God. And what did God, do? God delivered: God instructed Moses on exactly how to provide the needed water for the people: "Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your

hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.”

God provided water for the people – but God did it through Moses. And God is very specific on how Moses would meet this need: Do it in front of the people – let people see – and have nearby particularly credible witnesses – who will be able to relate what happens to people who aren’t there to see for themselves. Use the staff which you have previously used to show my power. I will be with you as you strike the rock and the water flows out. (17:5-6)

God is compassionate to Moses here - Moses is the one receiving the complaints, so Moses is the one that makes the water flow, and people will know that it is God working through Moses who provides the water. God provides what the people needed, but God also wanted them to see that Moses was doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing. God is effectively saying to the Israelites: “Don’t complain against Moses because you doubt my faithfulness to you.”

God wants to provide for his people. There is no need to whine and to complain; to put God to the test, or to feel as if God is not there. If we don’t like the way something is going, then maybe we should step back and reevaluate the situation, reminding ourselves of how God has always worked in miraculous ways in our lives. Perhaps we even take time to ask God why things are so difficult. It may not change our immediate circumstances, but at least in the act of turning to God in our frustrations, we will be reminded that God still walks with us, works through us, God still cares for us, and God provides us with just what we need, right when we need it. Although that might not be what we want. And it might not be when we think we need it.

We know God is loving and merciful – we know that even though we don’t deserve his grace God, gives it to us. God sent Jesus into the world not to destroy us but to save us. Even when the Israelites were complaining and blaming, God didn’t strike them down – instead God, through Moses, provided for them. And even when we test God or doubt God, God is still gracious to us today.

All of us from time to time find ourselves complaining, grumbling, murmuring. We’ve long since moved past giving constructive criticism. There are so many situations in our lives – and in our church where we get fed up, and tend to let others know what we think.

We have, I think, a human bias to find things to complain about. I’ve heard it put as ‘people aren’t happy unless they’ve got something to complain about’.

When the Israelites complained, they focused on what they didn’t have instead of remembering what they did have. We can be like that too - do we think that the dam is half empty or half full? Is the light at the end of the tunnel the way out or the oncoming train? The French writer Alphonse Karr said, “Some people are always grumbling because roses have thorns; I am thankful that thorns have roses.”

We should appreciate, though, that the wilderness time was a test from God to see if the Israelites would learn to depend on him. God talked about this in the previous chapter, Exodus 16:4, where he said to Moses “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.” Then, God was putting them to the test, but now, in their complaining, they decided to put God to the test – is the Lord among us or not? (17:7) they asked.

When they asked that, they were effectively accusing God of not properly doing his job, as if they knew better than God what God’s responsibility to them was. And it’s the same for us today, in all sorts of ways – we think we know what God should be doing. For us, for our church, for the world.

But God could say to us, as he did to Job, “Where were you when I created the foundations of the earth?” (Job 38:4).

But even though the Israelites complained, God provided for them, and I think we need to remember that. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes that the Israelites in the desert “ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.” (1 Corinthians 10:3-4)

And like the rock, Jesus too would be struck to become our provision. We read in John’s gospel (7:37-38) that Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”

On a regular basis, we gather here to fellowship with one another, to pray together, to listen for God’s word together, and to worship together. Part of what we do as followers of Jesus is to journey together as his disciples. We walk with one another in times of grief, we celebrate together in times of joy, and it also means that we support for one another in hardship and in even in doubt. Christians often perceive doubt as a sign of weakness, but we heard a few weeks ago that even when he walked on water, Peter doubted.

The question which the Israelites asked, “Is the Lord really among us or not?” is one that people have asked for thousands of years, one that we have probably all asked at least once in our lifetimes, and one which people will ask for all the years to come.

When we find ourselves asking that, we need to step back and remember all that God has done for us. Not ignoring our concerns, not blaming others, but taking to God. And trusting God always.

Amen.