

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, 15 March 2020

St Philip’s Anglican Church, O’Connor ACT Australia

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Exodus 17: 1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5: 1-11; John 4: 5-42

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I’m told that the Chinese character for “crisis” combines the character for “danger” with the character for “opportunity.” And so it is in today’s readings, where crisis is a common theme. God’s people wandering in the desert of sin experience a crisis of faith and confidence in God’s purposes, according to our Exodus reading. Moses and the community leaders are called into action by God, so they strike the rock and water pours out in a place that came to be known as Massah, a Hebrew word meaning test, and Meribah, meaning quarrel—because Israel had grumbled and complained, asking “Is the Lord among us or not?”

The opportunity that emerged from that crisis was the chance for God’s people to renew their faith and confidence, which is precisely what we see happening in today’s Psalm with its joyful praise and its call never to repeat what happened at Massah and Meribah.

Paul goes on to develop this theme of faith and confidence in our Romans passage today. He offers good news about a God who justifies the ungodly, who reaches across the barrier of sin to embrace an alienated humanity in Jesus Christ. God's mercy to the ungodly didn't even balk at the cross, we're told, so we ought to be completely confident, completely reassured that we're not destined for punishment by God.

It's in this spirit that Paul offers reassurance in the face of suffering. Instead of a crisis that's purely about danger, Paul encourages us to regard suffering as an opportunity for growth in endurance, character and hope. I think Paul's logic here is that we mustn't regard suffering as divine punishment—as some misguided Christians still do, who justify themselves at the expense of others less fortunate, who they blame for their own misfortunes. But our justification by grace apart from works of the law, which is Paul's great theme, puts an end to all spiritual one-upmanship of this sort. And it should stop us from mis-diagnosing life's crises, too, so that we become people always on the lookout for opportunity where the wrongheaded only see danger.

Now, all this is by way of introduction to this morning's well-loved Gospel story from John, about Jesus and his disciples encountering the woman at the well of Samaria and her community.

Here we have another sort of crisis, a border incursion, with Jesus the Jewish insider reaching out to a Samaritan outsider, who also happens to be a scandalous and hence a socially isolated woman. She trudges out alone to the well with her water jug in the heat of the day because all the other women would have gone together in the cool of the early morning and the late afternoon. Perhaps her chequered relationship history, five husbands and now a boyfriend, makes her the sort of woman that more respectable ladies prefer to keep at arms' length, not to mention away from their husbands.

But Jesus clearly hasn't got the memo about coronavirus, just as he completely disregards the equally anxious social protocols. He talks with a woman alone, and he asks a Samaritan for a drink, even sharing her own bucket. This is the sort of humane and merciful openness that we're so blessed to see from Pope Francis as he goes around the world showing everyone that Jesus is alive and well. He does this through his obvious delight in people and with his risk-taking, loving attention to every hurt and exclusion.

The woman at the well is clearly surprised by Jesus. She's intelligent, as her questions indicate, but she's also clearly a bit hurt and disappointed, a bit sceptical. But before long she forgets her water jug and runs home to bring back the villagers, because she's found the living water that her heart's been yearning for.

The disciples are surprised, too, that Jesus has reached out like this to a woman like this. God's mercy isn't for everyone, as we know. There's always going to be grumbling and quarrelling from those who've never tasted this living water themselves and who don't know what all the fuss is about. These are the ones who resent others for their joy and confidence in God when they've never felt any of it. Jesus constantly encountered religious people like this, and so do we in today's world and in today's Church. Instead, we're invited, just as the woman at the well was invited—just as the disciples were invited, just as Paul invites us—to have that sense of being justified by faith, of having any sense of shame and exclusion lifted from our shoulders, of not having to prove anything to God or to ourselves or to anyone else, and certainly not to feel that we need to maintain social exclusions and boundaries to protect ourselves. This might be good epidemiology confronted by a public health crisis, but it's bad theology if we make a lifetime habit of it: to maintaining barriers that Jesus lived and died to demolish.

Now one more thing, about mission and evangelism—two words that aren't often encountered in the Anglican vocabulary. When we come to see things the way we're invited to in today's readings, we're freed up to join in with Jesus, sharing his loving mercy towards others and reaping the harvest of transformed lives that his mercy inevitably brings. Notice the strange exchange about food between Jesus and his disciples at the end of today's Gospel, which becomes a discussion of the harvest, of the mission, which the disciples are called to join with Jesus in reaping. We hear that this harvest has been prepared for us by God and that we simply have to gather it in.

And to show us how simple and straightforward this is, we see Jesus' teaching enacted for us as the woman at the well brings other Samaritans to Jesus and then he closes the deal. She brings them and then their encounter with Jesus completes the circuit—just like our patron Philip with his invitation to come and see. And, friends, Jesus will do the same with us as he did with the woman of Samaria and her community. We don't have to do it all ourselves and, God knows, mission and evangelism aren't a program—they don't call for ordinary Anglicans and ordinary Anglican parishes to suddenly develop extraordinary skills. Boundary-crossing mercy, a patient and attentive welcome, being prepared to stick around as Jesus did, but above all trusting in the living water that we ourselves have been given is enough from us. Jesus will do the rest.

So, friends, Israel's question in the desert, "Is the Lord among us or not?", finds a positive answer. Yes, there is living water to be had in Jesus Christ, which transforms our hearts and our imaginations. It frees us from the spirit of anxious self-preservation and makes it natural for us to reach across boundaries of exclusion, because God's love and mercy impels us and because we've come to realise that we've got nothing to lose. Because there is a harvest to be reaped, which God is preparing and Jesus is inviting us to join. So many hearts are crying out for the same living water that God freely pours out for us in our baptism and in every Eucharist. All we have to do is line up and prepare to be surprised: about who we'll meet, about what we'll find ourselves able to do, and about the difficulties and sufferings that we can now face without doubting or complaining. And all this because we've tasted that living water.

The Lord be with you ...