

God Is With Us

Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-42

The Old Testament reading is about a people on a journey, people who had such great expectations about what was lying ahead. And those expectations were frustrated. It's a bit like people who came to Melbourne for the Grand Prix, and it was cancelled at the last minute [due to the corona virus outbreak]. We had some guests on Thursday evening who were going to the Grand Prix on Friday, and obviously they weren't able to get there, so they were a little bit upset about that. There were even a few boos from the people in the queues who didn't make it into the Grand Prix on Friday. There was some grumbling, there was some murmuring among the people, there was discontent. As the Israelites asked, is the Lord among us or not?

And I think these unique and difficult times with Covid-19 (and I don't know whether there is anyone in your life that has been most particularly affected by it at this point) brings this question perhaps even more to the fore for us in modern times.

For us here at St Paul's, quite apart from what's happening in our individual lives, we've been moving. This is only our second Sunday of services in this place. We processed as holy people carrying our holy things from Station St to this place a couple of Sundays ago. It's all in a state of great flux, and it's not always easy for us, is it?

It's certainly the same story for the people of Israel, of God's chosen ones, and it's the story of their leader Moses and God's walk with them. And I pointedly say "God's walk with them" rather than "their walk with God" as they ask the question, "Is the Lord among us?" In Exodus, there is a bit of a pattern in what goes on. There is amazing grace, amazing rescue, God at work! This followed by a short time of rejoicing and thanksgiving, followed by a great deal of grumbling, and murmuring, and questioning, at the first sign of difficulty.

Is the Lord among us, or not?

After the miraculous rescue of the people by God from slavery in Egypt, and then soon after, at the Red Sea when they were pursued by this strong army, there is a beautiful song of praise by Miriam and by Moses. What assurance that God is with the people! Things are looking good. But just three days later into their journey, the water and the people have become equally bitter. "So the people grumbled against Moses saying 'What are we to drink?'" And Moses their leader, in his role as intercessor, as pray-er (and it could be that there is something for us to think about in these days — it could be that it coming days and weeks, we won't be able to gather together for worship — I don't know; but the signs are that potentially that could be the case, aren't they? What's going to be our call to ministry? And I can't help but look to Moses in this space as the pray-er for all of God's people; and we'll need to think through really carefully how we are going to pastorally care for one another in these times. One of the things that, God willing, we will yet do, should we be able to continue worshiping together, is that during the services here, beginning next Sunday, Cathy Beaton and Karen Bonnington are going to walk the streets, and they are going to be praying for people as they do that.)

Moses, in his capacity, "cried out to the Lord and the Lord provided sweet water." All is well again. Calm is restored. The journey recommences. But later on in their journey in the desert of Sin

(and isn't that an interesting name) we hear "In the desert the whole community grumbled [again!] against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt'" — at least there we had plenty of food, plenty of toilet paper and everything else that the supermarket shelves have no longer got. This time both Moses and Aaron bear the brunt of the people's grumbling. But again, faithful God comes; faithful God *is* with the people. "I will rain down bread from heaven for you" — and I think it's important for us in these days, in these changing hours, to take in those promises. God is the God of grace. And I know we live in uncertain times, and sometimes we have great fear; but the God that I know is the God who comes on that journey with us. And so it was with those people so long ago.

But then we come to the situation in our reading today. Again the people are on the move — they are still being led by God to the Promised Land, so they've got so much to look forward to. But in this wilderness of Sin, again they have no water; so they quarrel with Moses, they murmur, they grumble again.

Moses says, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" And they grumble all the more. The grumbling. Moses had heard it all before. No doubt he must be tiring of it all. For instead of simply crying out to the Lord for his help as he had previously, Moses now says to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people?" And so often in our lives it becomes like this. "I need to take control. Maybe God's amongst us and maybe not; but I think it's actually time that I take control and take over here."

You know, I observe that, for all that's been going on for us as God's people here at St Paul's, it does take its toll. You know, it's been a long 12 months and then some for most of us — I've only been around for that short little period of time — and you know we can get tired, we can get ragged, and that's very understandable. I want to say publicly thank you to all of the people who have served here in so many wondrous ways, especially over these recent times. Exemplary witness! Outstanding. Thank you. And I know — and I'm looking at myself in the mirror here — that we all get a little bit ragged and it all gets a little bit hard. God? Are you among us, or not? What am I to do? Do you note the subtle change of what goes on here? But at least, even in that, Moses does at least call out to the Lord.

And again, the Lord delivers. He is the God of delivery. What he says, he does. God is faithful. God is present, as he always promised; and God delivers by waiting on the rock, by being there ahead of the people, and providing life-giving water.

Is it any different for you, for me, for us today? As an individual; in a family; in a group; as a community of faith, what's different? God certainly isn't different.

We too have been on a journey — a physical one, and yet also a very spiritual one. What we've left behind, we find that we meet again — we are met by our God again this day.

Is God amongst us, or not? You know, Jesus asked the same question: "My God, my God, why have you left me? Why have you forsaken me?" And then in so doing, brings the presence of God to us as we ask that same question today. He *is* amongst us. At the cross, at the place where Jesus asked that question, he exchanges the burden of death and sin for the sureness of forgiveness and life. *That* is the life-giving water that Jesus has for you and for me to drink.

And not only have we got this life-giving water to drink, but we have it as a gift to share. And in the unique times, we'll have to work out exactly what that is. On this journey, we are being prepared and taught how to share this life-giving water, I'm sure. It might be a difficult journey; sometimes it might even be exciting; but I'm sure it will be a challenge. But it's a journey for us to share, and for us to share with our Lord.

We hear that many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony: "He told me everything I've ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. [Just as he is staying with us.] And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world."

This word, this presence; this God is *with* you, and this God is *in* you, and *through* you.

As I've said, one of the ways that I am encouraging you to do that in these days of trial and difficulty is as "pray-ers", and as people who look out for one another. We'll unpack these things as our time develops here.

But my prayer is that God will use us in this time; will use us to encourage one another in the sure Word of Life and hope; and will encourage us to show God's life and hope in the way that we are, both here and as community for other people as well.

There was great expectation as they struck out on a journey of mission; a journey of life-giving water in a parched and difficult world; a journey of denying one's self and following where Jesus

takes us. A journey of humility, learning and growing together; a journey which leads to a bare hill and a cross, and a word of life and hope. Life for us to live and life for us to give. God is indeed here for you, and God is indeed among us. Amen.



A time of reflection

How are you / we called to share the good news?

- **Proclaim** the good news of Jesus.
- **Helping / inviting** someone to Jesus.
- **Intercession** - we are all little Moses': called to pray, to bring others' needs as intercessors (*maybe we are called to pray especially for the grumblers!*)
- **Receive** the life giving water yourself in the wilderness.