

Sermon 15th March – Dr Anne Shave

Prayer

Today is the third Sunday in Lent, and as we journey through this season towards the cross, our lectionary readings pose a big question: “Is the Lord with us, or not?” In times of challenge, struggle or sorrow in our lives, undoubtedly some of us will have put that question in the singular, “Is the Lord with me, or not?”

“Is the Lord with us, or not?” I would like to begin by saying that I believe the answer to that question is “Yes” - but of course I hope to explore the question a little more fully with you, especially as it is a question which today is coloured by current global events and also by the anniversary of the tragic shootings that occurred in Christchurch a year ago. However, if you hope that the theological “problem of suffering” will be resolved by me I am afraid you will be disappointed. As I read recently in a wonderful book of sermons by the former dean of Westminster Abbey, Michael Mayne, Jesus himself responded to suffering with great compassion but he never attempted to explain it, or even look to God to explain it. Jesus simply said that God is to be trusted, and he modelled that trust in God himself.

The question posed by the Israelites in today’s reading from the book of Exodus is a question of trust. Can we trust in God at times of difficulty? What can we learn from the situation recounted in today’s Old Testament reading? What was going on here? What did the Israelites get wrong? How did God respond? What relevance does this reading have for us?

I imagine we are all familiar with the story of the Israelites being led by Moses and Aaron out of Egypt towards the land God had promised that they would inhabit. It wasn’t a straightforward journey. They struck obstacle after obstacle, and also created a whole lot of obstacles of their own through their own disobedience and lack of trust in God. God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt but they took a long time to reach the promised land. One commentary I read about today’s passage pointed out that “the wilderness narratives are increasingly about a community that is “stuck” between promise and fulfilment. Wilderness is no longer simply a place but it is, for Israel, a state of mind.”

Today’s episode follows two very similar stories about the suffering the wanderers in the desert experienced because of their lack of resources – water and food. The

people had complained about these things before, and God had provided for them. (You might like to read the end of Exodus 15 and the whole of chapter 16 at home.) In these chapters of Exodus, bitter water became fit to drink. Manna and quails were provided for the people to eat. It's important for us to place today's reading in the context of those chapters because when we realise that this wasn't the first time that the people of God had faced thirst or hunger in the desert we might think that they would have had greater confidence that God was with them. But these are frightened people. They don't know where they are going, nor how they are going to get there. And they think that they and their children and livestock are going to die of thirst. So - they complain, and they ask, "Is the Lord with us or not?"

Well, I would like to admit that under similar circumstances I might well have reacted in exactly the same way as the Israelites. But one reason that this story is recounted in Scripture – not just here but also in the book of Numbers and in the Psalms - is so that we learn from their experience.

So, let's think about what went wrong here. I think there were two key things:

1. The people of God **forgot** what God had done for them – leading them out of slavery in Egypt, protecting them from the enemies who pursued them, and providing for them in the wilderness. When things got hard, they forgot.
2. They **complained**.

And these two things – forgetfulness of God's goodness, and complaining – fostered among them a culture of lack of trust in God. As Psalm 95 put it, they hardened their hearts and "tested and tried" God, though they had seen what he did for them.

I realise that what I am about to say may sound rather simple but I would like to suggest that if we want our faith and trust in God to grow and deepen then a good place for us to start might be to try to do the *opposite* of what the Israelites did. In other words:

1. **Remember** what God has done – throughout history, in the church, in other people's lives, and in our own.
2. **Be thankful**.

It's not always easy to put these intentions into practice, so I'd like to expand on them a little.

Remember what God has done:

Remembering is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. For example, Deuteronomy 6 – “Israel, *remember* this! The LORD—and the LORD alone—is our God. ... When the LORD brings you into this land and you have all you want to eat, make certain that you *do not forget* the LORD who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves.” Interestingly, these verses indicate that it can be hard to remember that God is with us when we are struggling, and also when things are going well!

The book of Psalms is full of songs and prayers which help God’s people to do some remembering together. **Eg: Psalm 106 – verses 7-13 and verses 43-47.**

Today, in the church, we need “rememberers” – not rememberers who say, “Wasn’t it great back in Egypt?” but rememberers who can testify to God’s faithfulness in their own lives as individuals, and in the world. We need people who can remind us of what others have learned about God’s goodness – in the stories of the Bible, in the lives of the Saints, and in the lives of our contemporaries who live out what they believe in inspiring ways. We need older people to walk alongside younger people who have usually had less experience of finding God in dark places – people who can say from experience, “God may seem absent, but when you look back you might realise that he was not.” There are times in all our lives when belonging to a church family who can do the “remembering” for us, is really important. Of course, it is at times when our faith feels wobbly that we may feel most inclined to stay away from church. If you are feeling like that at the moment, can I encourage you to hang in there?

Be thankful:

Well-known Dutch priest and theologian Henri Nouwen wrote: “It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint.” Thankfulness and gratitude are antidotes to complaining. And - exhortations to give thanks – like exhortations to remember – recur throughout Scripture.

Drawing from the Psalms again, Psalm 136 reminds us to thank God because of the constancy of his love.

- 1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever.
- 2 Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever.
- 3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords: His love endures forever.

4 Give thanks to him who alone does great wonders, His love endures forever. (And so on!)

As we noted earlier, when the Israelites asked, “Is the Lord with us or not?” this was a question of trust. By forgetting God’s goodness to them in the past, and by complaining, the people lost sight of God’s faithfulness. Moses became incensed by their complaints and was intimidated by their aggression. But how did God respond?

Well – God provided for them. Even though the Israelites complained and put God to the test, God answered Moses and provided water for the people to drink. They were reprovved by God, and their rebellion against God had consequences, but they weren’t abandoned. God disciplined them but remained committed to them. He didn’t wait for them to become hopeful, thankful people before rescuing them. How glad I am that God doesn’t wait for me to “get my act together” before reaching out to me.

When we remember God’s grace – his undeserved favour toward us – gratitude is a natural response. In today’s New Testament reading from the book of Romans, Paul urges his readers to remember that their relationship with God is founded on grace: “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. He has brought us by faith into this experience of God’s grace in which we now live.” “We rejoice because of what God has done through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has now made us God’s friends.” Paul also reminds his readers of the fruit that comes from persevering when troubles come – endurance and the approval of God and hope. And he reminds them that they are not alone: “God has poured out his love into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit, who is God’s gift to us.”

God is with us. We are not alone.

Psalm 97:12

All you that are righteous be glad because of **what** the LORD **has done!**
Remember what the holy God **has done**, and give thanks to him.