

Sermon

Sunday 27 September 2020

Lesson

Exodus 17: 1 – 7

My purpose in preaching always is to lead us into a deeper appreciation of the Divine. As we explore our sacred Scriptures together, I hope we will find spiritual nourishment and solace. Biblical stories are imaginative and full of symbolism; they are to be inwardly digested, savoured and, in the manner of Mary, pondered silently. They were told, re-told and written down for our growth and spiritual maturation. At its best, the Church offers its treasures for the inner journey; the pilgrimage of the soul.

In our lesson today, we are treated to the story of Moses, the quarrelling community of Israel, and the rock which gushed with water. In the wilderness, the desert place, the Hebrew people had walked for days under the punishing heat of the Middle Eastern sun. Very soon, there was an outcry against Moses: had he recklessly brought them out of Egypt to dehydrate and die in the desert? God, the LORD, told Moses to stand before the rock at Mount Horeb,

gather the people around him, and strike the rock with his staff. God promised that water would pour forth; a rapid and plentiful stream would satisfy their thirst and give them life. And it happened.

Is this a story solely about human thirst, the desperate need for H₂O, and the fear of physical death? Is it possible that the seeming miracle has a scientific explanation? On Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, some of the rock is porous. The limestone drips with water and water is retained under the outer layer. Did Moses shatter the surface of the rock with his staff thus releasing trapped water?

In rabbinic Judaism, in the meditations of the rabbis, *water* is a symbol for the Torah, the Jewish Scriptures. In an earlier story in the Book of Exodus, again of journeying through the wilderness, the Hebrew people walked for three days before they tasted ‘sweet water’. For the rabbis, sweet water was the study and nourishment of the Torah. A Jewish rabbi Himself, Jesus quoted the Scriptures of His tradition, saying, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord’. In every synagogue,

every Jewish house of prayer, the scroll of the Torah sits at the front concealed behind curtains, as if in the Ark of the Covenant. In the Book of Proverbs, 'She', the Torah, 'is a tree of life to those who hold fast to her'. During the service, when the scroll is carried through the congregation before it is read, Jews customarily reach out to touch and kiss it. Scripture is always open to multiple meanings. In our story this morning, the thirst of the people was for the spiritual nourishment and life only the Torah could give.

The story of the rock and its life-giving water was used imaginatively and symbolically by the Early Church and the Christian tradition. St Paul said that, in the wilderness, the Hebrews drank spiritual drink from the spiritual rock: the rock, he said, was Christ. In the Gospel of John, this same sentiment of 'drinking Christ', is found on the lips of Jesus: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink'. The baptism of Jesus and the story of the woman at the well are echoes of the desert experience. In the Gospel of Matthew, the powerful and dramatic confession of Peter, 'You are the Messiah', is followed by the equally dramatic and powerful

proclamation of Jesus, ‘I tell you, you are Peter (the rock), and on this rock I will build my church’. For the Early Church, for Christians over twenty centuries, and for us today, Jesus was and is the spiritual drink, the living water. At its best, the Church, the rock, offers spiritual drink to the world; water for the inner journey.

The Jewish Dutch author, Ety Hillesum, died in Auschwitz Concentration Camp in 1943. Earlier, while a prisoner in Westerbork Transit Camp, Hillesum wrote of God as her ‘high tower’, the strength of her life. Amidst the mass murder, Hillesum wrote:

There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too ... And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves.

In our shared spiritual tradition, one of the greatest teachers of the inner life, the anonymous writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, invites us in prayer, in our stilled moments, at home, in the park, the car or the high street, reading, cleaning or making marmalade, to be aware of God, even fleetingly. Our prayer need be no more than a simple word: ‘God’, ‘Love’, ‘Joy’, ‘Peace’: let yourself be transfigured for a

moment. The spiritual writer and former monk, James Finley, writes of a personal experience, which is instructive. One day he climbed into the loft of an abandoned sheep barn. With the sweet smell of hay, it was full of light and heat. In a hot, solitary silence, he sat reading the Psalms. Suddenly, he thought of the air as God. He began to walk around: he felt himself walking back and forth in God, breathing God. Finley says, 'I was vividly aware that the oceanic presence in which I was walking back and forth was sustaining my life, breath by breath....I was breathing the presence of God'.

Like Psalm 139, Finley says, 'There was nowhere I could run from God. For even if I were to try to flee, God would be sustaining me, breath by breath.....I realised in some baffling, matter-of-fact way that.....I was living my life in God and was being held by God always'. Nurturing the inner life is the core of organised religion. It's not complicated nor is it the reserve of holy people. It comes not in ecstatic moments, not especially through the harmonies of Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*, but in the ordinary and everyday. For me, the story of the rock gushing with water is not an event of 2500 years

ago; it is now, in the soul, yours and mine. Let the spiritual water rise. Let God be the deep well inside you. Let God be the breath you breathe. Let your prayer be no more complicated than one word.

Amen.