

10am EUCHARIST – LENT 3 – 15/03/2020

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

Today's Psalm, number 95, which we've just heard the choir sing, takes me back to going to church as a girl. When I was old enough to outgrow Pathfinders (which was the Sunday School offering back then), I used to go to the 11am Matins service with my Dad. Those of you who remember Matins will doubtless have recognised Psalm 95 as one of the canticles – the Venite as it is commonly called. It's still used as part of Common Worship's Morning Prayer service, on Fridays in Ordinary Time.

When I was a youngster it used to intrigue me that, although the Venite was printed out in full in the Book of Common Prayer, we always stopped after verse seven and went straight to the Gloria. If you look at the text of it now, you will see that meant we always omitted the section that starts 'O that today you would listen to his voice'. And even now, in Common Worship, the rubric directs that those last four verses may be omitted.

I recall asking Dad why we didn't sing that bit – and he said he thought it was because it didn't really go with the rest of it. I guess he was right. The Venite is a morning canticle and rather an upbeat text. And yet all of a sudden we are plunged into this change of mood.

That's not uncommon in the psalms – many of them change gear partway through, in a sudden lurch from hope to despair or vice versa. But the final four verses of the Venite don't even seem to work like that. If anything, they are a warning. Don't behave like the Israelites did at Massah and Meribah they are saying, or you will incur God's displeasure. Out of context, that doesn't seem to make much sense.

Today, you will realise, that choice of Psalm is perfect in light of the Old Testament reading from Exodus. Here we are told the circumstances in which the Israelites quarrelled with Moses and tested God, a lack of water on the long journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses did as God commanded and struck the rock with his staff – and out came fresh, flowing water to alleviate their thirst. The subtlety of the psalmist's poetry is not lost on us, as he says: 'let us heartily rejoice in the rock of our salvation'.

Yet something surprises me about this passage. You would think that, having obeyed God and struck the rock and obtained the water, Moses would have given the place a more triumphant name – something like 'here the water flowed from the rock' – so that the achievement was remembered for perpetuity. But he didn't. He named it Massah and Meribah – Massah meaning quarrelled and Meribah meaning tested. He intended that no one passing by that place in future would ever be able to forget the bad behaviour of the Israelites. This tale would always be told focussing not on the generosity of God's provision, but on the churlishness of the Israelites for berating God in the first place. It seems rather counterintuitive to me.

If we look at our Gospel passage, we move on well over a thousand years in history beyond Moses, but to a geographical place which was named long before his time. Jacob's well must have been so called before the Israelites ever went to Egypt – and, indeed, it still exists to this day.

The obvious coincidence between the two passages is the living water – the actual water miraculously flowing out of the rock for Moses, and the metaphorical source of living water – Jesus himself – promising the woman at the well that she will never be thirsty again.

But there's another connection. The woman at the well has a story – and one that she would much rather keep to herself. The reason she is at the well alone in the middle of the day is because she has been shunned by the other women of the city. She has a bad reputation and they won't associate with her. No one willingly carries heavy water jars around in the heat of the midday sun, yet that is her lot.

And the reason soon becomes apparent. Something about Jesus's attitude to her empowers her to tell him the truth – that she has no husband. But he miraculously knows that she has already had five husbands and is living with yet another man. The only reason she would have had many husbands is because she was a serial adulteress and they had all divorced her – hence why the other women in the city give her such a wide berth.

But once the truth is out and admitted to, all of a sudden her story becomes transformative and life-giving. She runs off back to town to tell the good news of this man who 'cannot be the Messiah, can he?'

The inevitability is that, in giving her testimony about 'a man who told me everything I have ever done', she has first to admit to the poor behaviour of her previous life. Only then does her assertion about Jesus make sense. But the transformation in her is so total that she is no longer worries about what people think of her. She just wants them to hear the good news too.

In our own lives there may well be moments when we encounter the transformational power of the risen Christ – and sometimes those are when we have had to confront our own sinfulness. But sometimes they are points when we have experienced profound disappointment or grief, or unsurpassed joy. Not every encounter with Jesus is borne out of sin. Yet whatever way we come to know his presence with us, it will inevitably become part of our story, part of our spiritual journey. And we are each given our own story, one uniquely suited to us and tailored to fit so that we are able to tell it to other people when the time is right.

But how does that apply to us today, as we cast our eyes around our global neighbours and wonder how fast and how hard the coronavirus is going to hit us in the UK? I will admit that I find it difficult to take comfort in Paul's assertion to the Romans that 'suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope'. My faith teaches me to hope, and I trust that hope will never leave me, but I'm not really looking forward to suffering this disease myself, or watching those around me suffer it either, if I'm honest. So where do we look for the living water this morning?

If we could imagine how the history books will tell the story of what happened here and across the world in 2020, what might they say? Could imagining that help us to find God's guiding hand now, as we enter the vortex? I think it might.

I am no medic and no scientist, but I did have a career in the secular world as a project manager. And that experience helps me to see that right now we have a little window of opportunity – who knows whether that is for a few days or a few weeks?

Before we get to the point where we are all instructed socially to distance ourselves or to self-isolate, we have a short amount of time to plan and we need to use it well. From a Christian perspective, I would say we need to plan in a Christ-like manner. So that means working out how we are going to live without our normal freedoms, and how we are going to help our neighbours to do the same. How can we make sure we all flourish as best we can, even in these strange circumstances?

Many of us live a long way distant from our extended families and we are not going to be able to look after them ourselves if they or we become ill. We are going to have to rely on the people next door. To get through this, our neighbours are going to have to be as family to us, and we to them. So now is a good time to plan how we are going to achieve that.

How well do we even know the people who live next door? What about the homeless folk down the road? Are we just going to rely on the government to pick up the pieces if our friends lose their jobs? Or will we be prepared to share, to give of our own resources until the pips squeak if necessary, in an effort to make sure that there is enough to go around?

Now is the moment to think through those connections, to call in and see the people around us and have a conversation about what their needs would be if they were poorly and what we would need if it happened to us. Now is the moment to keep putting food into the foodbank collection points, rather than panic-buying for ourselves until there is nothing left. Now is the moment to put away the odd bit of extra food or money to help out someone in a worse position than ourselves down the track. Now is the moment to swap phone numbers with others you know in this congregation, so you can keep in contact with each other if you can't come to church. We will do what we can to offer pastoral support – of course we will – but you can help each other to socialise over the phone, if you plan out how to do it now.

Above all, now is the moment to keep praying for protection for all of us, especially for our health-workers, and for a spirit of generosity to help us act together.

In years to come the history books will make their own judgements about how the 2020 Pandemic plays out. They will tell those who come after us whether it was a watershed moment in which the best of humanity came to the fore and we got through with a reinvigorated sense of community spirit. Or they will tell the tale of how an increasingly selfish society sowed the seeds of its own destruction by fighting, every person and nation for itself, in its hour of need.

We have a choice. We can be a generation that quarrels and tests God, an angry people blaming him and failing to see his mercies in the very neighbours around us. Or we can seek the living water, even in a situation as grave as this may turn out to be, by striving to be the face, hands and feet of Christ for others, albeit whilst observing strict hygiene protocols.