

Theme:

'And the Lord said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the Lord saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" (Exodus 17:5-6)

Our reading from Exodus splits into two parts of dialogue; the first is the conversation between the Israelites and Moses, which we can summarise like this:

The Israelites: "Why have you led us to this place to die of thirst?"

Moses: "What are you blaming me for and why don't you trust the Lord as I do?"

The second dialogue is between Moses and the Lord:

Moses: "What do I do with this lot Lord, they want to kill me, I could do with a little help here!"

The Lord: "Take some elders as witnesses and the staff I gave you in Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to let the people go, and head up to the rock at Horeb and strike it and water will come out of it."

So what is going on? We basically have a situation of trust, or rather a lack of trust in the Lord to bring the people through the wilderness to the promised land. What the people thought was a lack of water was more the case that they doubted the presence of God with them on the journey. Every time things got particularly hard they would quarrel with Moses as leader, but really they were quarrelling with God and doubting either that God was present, or that God was doing anything to help them. This had happened before, once when the people had no bread and again when there was no meat, and each time the Lord provided what was needed.

What is significant is what the Lord says to Moses:

"Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink."

So let's look at this in more detail.

The Lord says: "Pass on before the people"; in other words, come on Moses, you're in charge and you need to show it, not only to the people but to the elders who should be there to support you in this task.

Then: "Take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go"; this staff is your badge of office given to you by me, use it to its greatest effect.

Next: "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink."

Now this statement is the most remarkable of all. Firstly, "Behold"; this means something important is going to be said or going to happen; in this case: "I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock".

Now why is this important? Think about what the Lord is saying: "I will stand before you there on the rock", not above, or to the side, but on it. That is what the Lord is going to do; he is going to stand on the rock and the staff will strike the rock while he is stood on it. The 'water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.'" While the Lord is standing on it. How much closer does the Lord have to be?

There is an analogy here. The Lord is overseeing the life-giving water through Moses' obedience; the very sort of obedience and trust that the people are lacking.

Fast forward to Jesus' time to see the comparison. Jesus is referred to as a rock in the gospels, indeed, the cornerstone on which a strong house is built. Those in positions of civil and religious power at the time are very doubtful about who Jesus said he really was. Even Peter, his own disciple, was wobbly in faith here. And did the crowd not shout "Crucify him!"?

And yet through Jesus' obedience in going to the cross, he, the Lord himself is struck, as the rock was struck, this time with the hammer and nails to fix him to that cross. The blood flowed. His subsequent death and resurrection not only offers life to his followers, but his Holy Spirit is poured out as streams of living waters so that the people may drink.

This analogy would not be lost on his disciples when it happened. They would be aware of this scripture about Moses, fighting to gain the trust of the people for the Lord, and see in it the Lord's own battle with the rebellious people of the disciple's own generation. History was repeating itself; the Lord was actively working in order to allow the people to drink of living water.

What then of ourselves in our generation? Are we a people of doubts such that in response to reacting to the Lord testing us, we would rather take the initiative and test the Lord? Friends, I fear we are.

The reason that I have chosen Psalm 95 along with the reading from Exodus, is it gives an example of the reluctance of the Church of England, at least, to engage with the question of our sin. In many places these days they do 'nice church'.

There are too many preachers who don't really want to engage with the question of sin too much or too seriously for fear of frightening off the congregation and getting a reputation as a fire and brimstone preacher. There are too many congregations who don't wish to be confronted with truth that might disturb them. Therefore the latest trend becomes the thing many obsess about. Sometimes that trend is even something that the Lord tells us in scripture is not to his liking.

Nowhere is this attitude better revealed today than in Psalm 95. These days, when you see Psalm 95 written in the liturgy, it mysteriously stops at the end of verse 7. This has been so ever since the time I was ordained. Why?

Because these days we don't like to think we are in the wrong. It is easier to adopt the attitude: 'Let's stop at the bit about how great God is and how much he cares for us. Do not however, let him remind us of our sin of which we should be ashamed. To do this is a great mistake. We need to be reminded of our failings, or how else can we honestly say to the Lord: 'I'm sorry Lord; help me Lord!'

It seems the Church of England hierarchy downwards, in many places has a desire to please people before pleasing God; as indeed, the Archbishop of Canterbury has recently found to her cost. There are some other Anglican provinces who seem determined to follow their lead. Fortunately, there are other Anglican provinces, mostly in Africa, who are opposed to such a policy.

It pains me to say this. It does no-one any favours, least of all the Lord and certainly not us. Vv.8-11 were written there for a reason: 'Don't go there, but if you do, repent.'

Instead of trusting in the Lord to see to our best interests, do we provoke him through our lack of trust in his ability to see us safely through not only this life, but to heaven? Is our lack of trust hindering his desire to work through us to bring the living water of the Spirit to others? Are we spiritually thirsty ourselves?

These are the questions we have to answer honestly, and if we find ourselves wanting and needing to make the appropriate adjustment in our faith, we must make it, rather than constantly provoking the Lord by wondering: "Is the Lord among us or not?"