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**Exodus 17.1-7
John 4.1-15
15th March 2020

 Is the Lord in our midst or not?**

*Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*

It was a time of crisis for a people on the move.

Moving always brings stress, even moving on from slavery in a foreign land. For many in that vulnerable, nomadic procession through the wilderness, servitude in Egypt as they built Pharaoh’s palaces and pyramids might have been all they’d ever known, but at least they had once had a daily allowance of food and drink. Since crossing the Red Sea this was no longer guaranteed and none of them had time to stockpile provisions before they left.

They were a nation on the move with Moses as their leader and all of this was meant to be God’s idea. Yet, it was demanding, challenging and at times confusing. Where were they going exactly and did anyone really have a map of how to get there? For years they had followed someone else’s orders, now they had to grow their own leaders and plan their own days.

No wonder it felt like a crisis. It was all so horribly new and just a few were beginning to think that maybe they might have been better off staying behind in Egypt.

Well, that’s the story so far and now they were had encamped at Rephidim and those niggles and grumbles grew into siren voices of complaint against both Moses and God because the water had run out.

What do we do and how do we react in a crisis? Perhaps not a totally irrelevant question during these difficult Spring days of 2020.

Well, there in Rephidim among the tents and campfires, as family groups did their best to look after each other, a negative attitude took hold and the murmurings started.

Walk around the camp and take the mood temperature and it became clear that things were turning ugly. Moses was approached and it shocked him to encounter a people who had once trusted him now quarrelling with him, a people who once praised God for their new found freedom now wanting to put God to the test as if he was on trial for leading them through such a parched and barren place.

So Moses called this place of conflict Massah and Meribah. Massah meaning testing and Meribah meaning quarrelling.

Crowd dynamics can take on a disturbing life of their own in a crisis.

I remember our German teacher at school telling us that in her teenage years she had been part of the Hitler Youth. I reflect now with immense gratitude at her candid honesty in speaking to us of those days. ‘What was I to do’, she said, ‘Even though I felt so uncomfortable about it all, when my friends marched, I marched with them’. She was an excellent teacher to us, in more ways than one.

What do we do in a crisis? Well, sometimes we just join in with the chorus of murmurings and complaints as they did that day in the camp at Rephidim.

They also started the blame game, because isn’t it always someone else’s fault?

In today’s reading they accuse Moses. He’s no longer the hero of the hour, the great liberator, honoured for standing up to Pharaoh, now he’s the botched leader and so they say: *Why have you brought us out of Egypt with our children and our herds and let us die of thirst?*
Leaders, I think, have to be sponges as they mop up other people’s complaints. So, Moses took their hits and maybe they felt better because they had someone to blame.

I love the idea of praying for our leaders rather than simply criticising them. That’s part of the Jewish, as well as the Christian, tradition. The set prayers for Sabbath Synagogue services instruct the worship leader to remember the Head of State and government of the country where those prayers are being said.

Praying for our leaders is good, it makes us look at them as fellow humans, vulnerable when confronted with so many big issues and standing in need of wisdom and courage.

The third reaction I note this morning from Rephidim is the people’s amnesia in this moment of crisis. They simply forgot the past.

They forgot the bravery of Moses. They forgot their great liberation from the shackles of Egyptian slavery. They forgot they had a God who could be trusted.

And in all this forgetting of the past they became utterly desperate about the present. Instead of the past inspiring them it was as if it had never existed. Each day began as with the first page of a new book rather than just the next chapter of an old one.

No wonder, when he came down from the mountain, Moses gave the 10 Commandments to the people with the words: *Remember this, O Israel, the Lord alone is our God and we will worship him.*

Remembering adds perspective to our lives. We remember as we take communion. We remember as we walk with Jesus through Lent. We remember as we celebrate a life during a thanksgiving service.

Remembering takes the past seriously and values it as holy ground. It’s experiences and lessons guide, encourage and even warn us as we take the next steps into the future.

So far, in this sermon, the people’s response to crisis has been pretty poor and perhaps uncomfortably familiar to us. They complained, they blamed someone else and they forgot so much about God and their journey thus far.

Let’s follow up these three negatives with a few positives.

These were months and years of transition for a people on the move. They had left where they never truly belonged, yet they had not fully arrived home. These are the ‘in-between’ years and for them ‘wilderness’ wasn’t simply a place but a state of mind.

One response to crisis is to nurture a mindset that appreciates the present as a work in progress rather than the finished article.

That’s a characteristic of anyone’s journey through life. It’s also a feature of the Kingdom of God, that shorthand term describing the way God works among us. Jesus taught us the Kingdom is now and not yet. So, when we pray in the Lord’s Prayer: *Thy Kingdom Come* we appreciate that so many good and loving things of God are already blessing our life together. Yet, we are not there yet. We strive to be more loving and we long for greater justice and we do this with hope and determination, understanding the present with all its moments of crisis, as simply a stage upon the journey.

Of course, the most dramatic action in this ancient story is that moment when Moses strikes the rock and water flows.

Read one way and it’s a miraculous event that showed the presence and provision of God. Yet, I was interested this week to read another interpretation.

Might it just be that this story describes something that seemed miraculous to an ancient people. A moment of discovery as, in a moment of great need, they come across spring water; water not from the sky but from rocks. An alternative source of water that could sustain them in their wilderness journey. It felt to them like an answer to prayer and it’s written up as one.

Isn’t that so often the way God works in our world? We are made in his image; a poetic way of reminding us that we, in some senses, share in this creative act of developing our world. Many discoveries and inventions that have blessed our lives, whether from the world of industry or medicine, would have seemed like miracles to a previous generation.

Is God present with us in a crisis? So often that question has behind it, perhaps understandably, a longing for God to become manifest in some supernatural way. Yet, isn’t God also in our midst as we, finding our best selves, work together to fight infection or poverty. In a congregation like ours folk are walking free of pain because of new hips, seeing clearly again as cataracts are removed. And when the medicines cannot save us, God’s love is manifest in the love of family and friends who enfolds us in their care and support.

Water transforms life, so what a moment it must have been to see it flowing through and under rocks.

In our New Testament reading today Jesus meets the woman at the well. She has a messy past and this encounter seems to give her great hope for the future. Jesus speaks in metaphor of the water of life that could cleanse and refresh her. She goes from the well a changed person, now able to bring her stronger self to the challenges that are before her.

Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi, was on Radio Four’s Start the Week last Monday. The programme was discussing how we cope with a crisis like the present one. Two solutions had already been laid on the table. One contributor thought statistics could help. We can use figures to help us understand what’s going on. Another said stories might help. We tell stories of previous episodes like this and learn valuable lessons that way.

Jonathan Sacks introduced the idea of virtue. It’s a technical ethical term. Put simply it’s about good people doing their best. It’s about us bringing honesty, integrity, self-sacrifice, wisdom and compassion to the challenges that will always face us. Lord Sacks said that’s how we make progress; we bring our best selves and together we find a way.

I think that’s God at work, that’s God in the midst.

It was a time of crisis in the camp at Rephidim, there was no water. What was to be done and where was God?

Options were available. You could complain, blame others and forget the past. Or you could recognise that such challenges are always part of living in the ‘in-between’, rejoice at new discoveries such as spring water, and willingly bring your better self to the journey.

A story from the past with much to say, I believe, about our present

May we have a perception that sees God at work. Glimpses that make our hearts glad as we seek to join in with that work.

May it be so, in the name of the God who is always there in the midst of any crisis walking beside us. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 12th March 2020*