

## Sermon: Exodus 17:1-7 27 SEP 20 (SMO)

Our reading today from the book of Exodus is on the face of it about water - or lack of it. But actually, it's got an important message for us, living in Autumn, 2020. As we'll see.

### ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS

There's an awful lot of grumbling going on - in this passage.

I'll say that again. There's an awful lot of grumbling going on - in this passage.

Six times, we're told the people of Israel tested or grumbled or quarrelled with Moses.

Now this grumbling really is not fit for the people of God. It's insulting to God (and Moses) and it's quite unfounded.

God has just delivered these people from the Egyptians through the Exodus. God parted the Red Sea so they could cross and escape, then he let the sea return to slaughter the Egyptians wholesale. This was God's mighty work - the founding miracle of the nation of Israel. It stands out in the bible as Israel's great deliverance - for thousands of years since the Jews have celebrated and proclaimed the Exodus as a mighty work of God.

And here the people are, soon afterwards, grumbling aggressively, so that Moses says "They are almost ready to stone me."

It's not as if God hasn't already shown his care. They grumbled recently about bitter water in chapter 15, and God made the water sweet. They grumbled about lack of food in chapter 16, and God sent them a few thousand lorry loads of quail. And now God's giving them manna, daily, to feed them throughout their years in the desert.

And as if that's not enough, God guides them with a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day.

Yet they grumble. They've just escaped slavery - they haven't even reached Mount Sinai and they received the ten commandments yet, but they grumble.

They grumble against Moses, because they're thirsty for water. But of course really, their grumbling is against God - as Moses points out at the end of verse 2 when he says, "Why do you put the Lord to the test?"

It's almost as if they'd rather be miserable slaves, back in Egypt, under the rod of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Verse 3, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" they say.

How easy it is to romanticise the past, isn't it? To kid ourselves that it was better in the good old days. Here they are, a nation at last, Israel, free, under the jealous protection of the Creator of the universe - and they grumble because they're thirsty.

These are God's people, but they're not behaving like God's people. And what's the real sin - the real reason their grumbling is so toxic?

Our master narrator leaves it right until the last 7 words of our passage to show us. They were saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

What unbelief! What faithlessness!

Is the Lord among us or not? IS THE LORD AMONG US OR NOT? The Lord has given them water to drink and meat to eat. He's providing manna every day for them. He's just performed a mighty act of deliverance from Egypt - one of the great acts in the history of the world, let alone the Jews.

And the Lord's leading them by providing a socking great pillar of cloud by day - and a socking great pillar of fire by night.

"Is the Lord among us or not?"!

Not that it's wrong for the Israelites to be concerned about water - wondering in the desert without water is a fearful thing. Concern is natural.

Rather, it's lack of faith - failure to trust that God will provide the water they need.

To be sure, their familiar landmarks are gone - and there are no new ones in sight yet. They don't really know where they are, unsure where they're going and where this is all leading.

But what they do have trumps all that: they have God's presence. Their life now is going to be extraordinary - a journey in the company of God, their rescuer and protector.

They have no reason to doubt him. He's already shown them that.

It's easy to criticise, of course. Like the rest of the bible, this account is given to us for a reason. So that we can learn from it - not so that we can tut tut about the people of Israel.

So what's the lesson for us?

## OUR SOCIETY TODAY

There's an awful lot of grumbling going on - today.

I'll say that again. There's an awful lot of grumbling going on - today.

Grumbling about lots of things, but particularly about Coronavirus. People are grumbling about the government, about the NHS, grumbling about having to travel to get a test, or because there isn't a test, or because track and trace isn't working.

Grumbling because lockdown came too soon, or because it was too late. Because we're overreacting, or because we're not doing enough. Because the rules are too complex, or because the rules are too simple - and so arbitrary.

Grumble, grumble, grumble, just like the Israelites in the desert.

People are grumbling because no-one in government or healthcare or police or social services is perfect. Because the Prime Minister hasn't got prophetic 20-20 foresight.

Grumbling because no-one fully understands this disease and no-one knows how it will develop - so **who can we blame?**

As someone has said, democracy is the process whereby the people decide who's going to get the blame.

Easy, just to blame the government, isn't it? Just like the Israelites blamed Moses. I wonder if Boris Johnson sometimes feels as if the people are almost ready to stone him?

And perhaps if we think about it, we realise that what we're really grumbling and angry about is the disease. What a pain it is! Why can't life just return to normal? Why can't it be like it was before? And the danger then is that we're really blaming God himself. "Why did God let this happen?"

My friends, grumbling like this really is not fit for the people of God. It's not fitting for the Christian faith. It's insulting to God and in reality it's faithlessness - it's testing God. If we grumble like this, we're no better than the grumbling Israelites in the desert - in fact we're worse.

It's not easy to cope when you lose your job, or your business closes because of lockdown. When your schooling and exams and studying is messed up, and suddenly all is up in the air.

It's not easy when you lose a relative or close friend to this nasty disease. It's not easy to cope when you have to work from home in a poky flat and the kids demand attention all day because they can't go to school. And you're not allowed into the hospital or care home to see your sick and lonely parent.

Coping with a crisis is not easy. It wasn't easy to travel through the desert without water, either. But it dishonours God if we grumble about it.

As Christians, if we grumble about Coronavirus, we're really grumbling about God. We saying either that God isn't in control - or that if he is in control he's got it wrong - he shouldn't be letting this happen - he doesn't know what he's doing. It is tantamount to saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

But we have absolutely no reason to doubt God. However dark things look, however painful events in this life might turn out to be, Christians can be confident that our future in eternity with Him is cast iron guaranteed

Two things, then, for us to take away from this passage this morning.

### FIRST TAKEAWAY

Firstly, if we are Christians, let us be careful not to grumble about Covid, or about our lot in life, or about anything else. Rejoice always, says Paul, give thanks in all circumstances. Grumbling is not rejoicing. The only thing Paul says about grumbling, is don't do it.

God is the same today as he was at the time of the Exodus. His jealous love for his people is the same.

The Israelites saw the mighty works of God in the Exodus and at the Red Sea.

But we are far more privileged - we have seen what the Exodus pointed to: the coming to earth of God himself. He took on human flesh as Jesus, lived among us, was crucified, died and rose from the dead, he ascended to heaven and now rules over all creation.

The Exodus rescued the Israelites from the slavery of the Egyptians through water: Jesus rescues us from the slavery of sin through his blood.

The Israelites had the mighty works of God at the Exodus - we know the real thing - the mighty works of God in Jesus Christ.

We might not be thirsty for drinking water as the Israelites were. But we still depend totally on God. Our familiar landmarks might be disappearing - it might not be clear yet what our life will look like in future. Like the Israelites, we might well have lots of questions about what will happen.

God doesn't promise to answer all our questions. What he does promise is to come with us on our journey - to be with us. He promises us his presence. He wants us to trust him, to rejoice in his presence, and leave the future to him.

The Israelites knew God's presence by pillars of fire and cloud. But Christians know it by God's Holy Spirit, living within us. We know the Spirit's presence in us when we pray. He guides us as we pray, as we read the bible, opens our eyes to its truth, writes it in our hearts, and feeds us with joy as we read and hear the word God has given us.

And the Spirit in us is like rivers of living water. Like the living water Jesus offered the crowds in the Temple. Living water, flowing out of our hearts like a spring - as Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well. It's a spring, not a cistern - it doesn't just fill up, it flows out.

We have no reason to grumble, and every reason to rejoice. God is with us and in us through his Spirit.

## SECOND TAKEAWAY

But what about people who would not call themselves Christians? After all, that's the majority of people in our society, isn't it?

Behind the grumbling - and panic, even - about Coronavirus, lies fear. Fear of death. Our society has no answer to death, and Coronavirus brings the threat of death.

And it brings uncertainty, loss of control, it brings out people's inner questions about where this will end, how can I plan, how can I cope, why am I feeling like this?

These questions reverberate through our society and are echoed in the media. This world has no answer to such questions.

People in this position - maybe that's you - have a need. Not for drinking water, but for living water - for the freedom and life that only God can offer. The presence of God, so that life in this world, and Coronavirus, and death, hold no fear for them.

How can they get that living water? By believing in Jesus. “Whoever believes in me” says Jesus, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

And how can they believe in Jesus? By us telling them. That’s our second takeaway - we are to tell people about Jesus.

What exactly are we to tell them? We’re to tell them the mighty acts of God - just as Christians have been doing for the last two thousand years.

In other words, we’re to tell them that Jesus is the Son of God who came down from heaven, lived on earth, was crucified, died and was buried; rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and, gloriously, is now Lord of all creation.

That’s what we have to tell people - the facts. We don’t need to be bible experts or theologians - we don’t need to know any thing, we just need to know Jesus.

Do you know Jesus?

It’s been said that telling others the gospel of Jesus is like a thirsty person telling another thirsty person where they can find water. That’s the Christian’s job - to tell other people where they can find rivers of living water - in Jesus.

The global pandemic changes nothing about the gospel of Jesus. The gospel’s still the best news ever. We need to tell people while we can.

Two takeaways then:

Let us not grumble and test God, but be confident and rejoice in his great rescue. And let us tell others the reason for our confidence and rejoicing.

Amen.