Sermon for 26th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

i

It wasn’t just bad planning or poor map reading that dictated the Israelites wandered about in the desert for 40 years – it was a theological necessity. We read in Exodus 13:17 that God had to take them the long, circuitous route rather than the direct route to Palestine because God knew they would have turned back at the first sign of resistance from the Philistines who lived across the direct road. The Israelites also needed time to learn some valuable lessons before they were ready to enter the Promised Land.

Firstly they needed to learn about obedience.

They had finally followed Moses’ instructions about the Passover and had escaped the slaughter of the first born, but this obedience followed many episodes of rejection and suspicion from the day when Moses murdered the Egyptian slave driver to the day when Moses and Aaron first confronted pharaoh to let the people go.

In the desert wandering, the Israelites had to learn more fully what God required and learn to obey him. This came to pass through the momentous giving of the 10 Commandments.

In our passage from Exodus 17 their lesson in obedience has barely begun.

In Matthew 21:23-32 we see that it is not always immediately obvious who is being obedient to God and who is not. The chief priests accuse Jesus of breaking the Law and wish to know on what authority he commits such sins. From the point of view of the religious Establishment, priests, Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus was constantly disobeying God’s Law by mixing with sinners, forgiving repentant sinners and healing the sick on the Sabbath.

Jesus asks them a question not about legal technicalities, but about deeper spiritual and moral realities. If John was sent by God, which the Establishment had to concede because they feared a popular uprising if they didn’t, and John the Baptist had endorsed Jesus as the Messiah, they would have to accept John’s support for Jesus.

Rather than face the spiritual and moral challenge to ask themselves if what Jesus was doing in healing the sick, forgiving the sinners, feeding the hungry and raising the dead was in principle good, despite at times infringing the technicalities of the Law as they understood it, they preferred not to struggle with their conscience about whether they had misunderstood what God really requires, and in preference they ducked the issue by refusing to answer Jesus’ question.

In Paul’s *Letter to the Philippians*, Paul presents us with the ultimate example of obedience – that of Christ, who had equality with God, but who obediently laid it aside to become as a servant and to die an ignominious death on a cross. Only through such obedience could our salvation be won. Christ is the model of Christian obedience we are called to follow and Paul shows us the way.

ii

Secondly, the Israelites need time in the desert to learn about dependence.

They had to learn that they could not survive if they relied solely on their own wits and hard work. This is a difficult lesson for us all. We strive to grow into self-reliant, capable, responsible adults and members of society – and so we should – but that should not blind us to the greater truth that our life is only possible because we, and creation as a whole, are held in the hands of God.

We all have our own Exodus to negotiate: life is our long and winding journey home. Along the way, we have to first learn that we are dependent on a loving gracious God for creation, for life, for guidance and for help in times of trouble.

The Israelites should not need to learn this lesson; surely God has demonstrated enough in Egypt for them to know that they can and should depend on him for their freedom. Their tendency to complain and threaten to go back to Egypt every time they have a problem shows us how far they are from grasping that truth.

Jesus had his own desert to cross and rely on God to come to his aid and work through him. What can it have been like the very first time Jesus commanded the evil spirit to come out of the man in Capernaum synagogue, or he told the dead to rise or the sea to ‘be still’? Paul is aware that the ultimate test for Jesus was to believe God would raise him up again. This is the understanding of God we are called to have; we can do incredible things if we only learn to use the power of God rather than rely on our own cleverness.

Matthew 21 shows us that the chief priests and other members of the religious Establishment preferred to do things themselves by assiduously applying the letter of the Law – expanded over the centuries to encompass every aspect of life. They had the education to indulge in such ways.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes and the poor were entering the kingdom before the priests, Scribes and Pharisees because they have no such pretensions to wisdom and authority. They are more willing to submit to the manifest spiritual authority of Jesus (Mark 1:22), whereas the Establishment had to get over their professional pride to follow Jesus and that proved to be a stumbling block many could not overcome.

iii

A third thing the Israelites have to learn through their Exodus years is that they can trust God. This is closely related to the last point that they need to understand they are dependent on God rather than themselves. Having learnt that they cannot do it in their own power and that they simply must allow God to help them is one essential lesson; but it is equally essential to know that they can trust God to offer such help when required. They do not have to constantly drag back the controls because they feel God has fallen asleep at the wheel.

This is still as hard for us to learn as it was for them. God does not keep to our timetable as we would sometimes wish. It is so tempting to show God the way, rather than the other way round!

There is an interesting Jewish legend attached to the story of Exodus 17. According to the legend, the rock which Moses struck to produce the water followed the Israelites all the way to the Promised Land, giving water in the desert as they went.

If that means we are to believe that a rock crawled across the sand unaided, that is asking a bit too much for most modern believers, but if that legend is designed to illustrate that God is faithful and dependable and will go with us every day through the desert – well, that is exactly right.

There is another aspect to this story which we often overlook. According to the version of this event recorded in Number 20:1-13, Moses and Aaron are denied access to the Promised Land and both of them will die before the people cross the Jordan into Israel.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them (Numbers 20:12).

Some scholars suggest that Moses’ sin was to claim he and Aaron brought the water from the rock and did not ascribe the miracle to God (“Must **we** bring water out of this rock?” Numbers 20:10), but I think it is because Moses and Aaron submitted to the people’s moaning against God and rather than urge the people to trust God to lead them safely across the desert, they took the people’s lack of faith and presented it to God on their behalf, setting a challenge to God to do something special, otherwise the people would revolt and they would not be able to do anything to prevent them.

By this reading, God is punishing Moses and Aaron for their lack of leadership. The miracle of the water from the rock should never have been required especially as God has just shown his dependability in the giving of Manna.

How many more times does God have to come to their rescue before they understand that they can trust him? By presenting the complaints of the people before God about the lack of water, rather than instructing the people to trust God’s guidance across the desert, perhaps they are guilty of a lack of trust themselves.

Paul’s life, by contrast, is an act of supreme trust. He has given up so much and risks everything time and again, despite the many hardships such obedience entails, but he is not ultimately disappointed. He may have said to the Philippians, “For me to live is Christ to die is gain” – those are fine words, but Paul, like the Christ he follows, was willing to live by such words right up to his martyrdom in Rome.

The chief priests, Scribes and Pharisees struggle to let go of the control they exercise and trust God for what he is doing before their eyes in Jesus. Rather than trust God knows what he is doing, they are prepared to argue that the manifestly good things Jesus does are of the devil. There is no salvation in that.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**November 2016**