

Year A Creation 4 27th September 2026

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

Pouring Out

In our reading from Genesis we find Moses being berated once more by the Israelite community. Despite God providing them with food (manna and quails), they were now grumbling about a lack of water. Did not God's provision at Elim satisfy them that God would provide? Moses in some exasperation, cried out to God for help. And God tells Moses how he can provide water in the desert. The apparently dry Rock of Horeb hid within its structure a water course, and striking it created a fissure through which water flowed.

This story makes me wonder how Moses managed to persuade the Israelite community to move on from this place, for they could not carry the rock of Horeb with them? Maybe this act of God's provision was sufficient for the Israelites to be convinced that God would provide wherever they went, rather than being stuck in one place.

Today, we may feel that we enjoy God's provision, and don't want to risk changing anything? Sometimes being too comfortable limits our experience of God's provision, and can not open us up to new ways of being. Change is hard, especially when everything feels OK, and possibly even good or very good. The Israelites did travel on from Horeb. What is our own individual version of Horeb, and where may God want to encourage us to journey on to, I wonder?

I want to jump to the gospel reading then come back to Philippians.

In our Gospel reading Jesus is challenged by the chief priests and elders who believe they have the authority to teach and also have sole authority to decide who else can do so. The first half of our reading relates the confrontation. As we have come to expect, Jesus does not directly answer their questions about by what authority he was teaching, and who gave him permission to teach. Possibly, he doesn't accept their authority, so does not believe he needs to explain himself to them. To do so would cede to them that authority. Their

understanding of the nature of God and how they should behave was so totally different from Jesus'.

I am sure you have come across people whose starting point is so different from you; you realise their whole premise and principles are totally different from yours. Once that realisation dawns, you have to completely change how you approach the conversation in order to have any chance of a meaningful conversation and communicate effectively.

For instance, in conversation about human-made climate change, if the other person does not accept that core premise of human activity changing the composition of the atmosphere which drives the heating of the earth, then you need to either change from discussing the most effective ways of tackling the climate crisis to a completely different discussion about the scientific facts (not opinions) that show a direct correlation between greenhouse gas emissions and the increase in temperatures across the world, or don't engage in the conversation.

Jesus was very adept at identifying the premise from which someone or a group was engaging with him. In this case Jesus asked them one searching question about the authority for John the Baptist's ministry. The elders and chief priests chose to lie, saying 'they did not know'. That confirmed for Jesus that they lacked integrity. These leaders did not love and serve those they led. In fact they were afraid of the people, especially the people's devotion to John. In the light of that response, in the second half of this gospel reading Jesus responds to their question to him by telling a parable.

The first son initially resists his father's request to work in the vineyard. But crucially he changes his mind – he repented as we might say – and chose to obey his father's request. This son represents all those who were outcasts but who heard the call and chose to obey God, and to do God's work in the vineyard. The vineyard was understood to be the land inhabited by the Israelites.

The second son says he will do what the father asked, but did not follow through with any action. He lied to God, lacking integrity and care for others. He does not change his mind and decide to obey God.

I am sure the chief priests and elders realised that they were characterised as the second son. They say the right things, make a verbal commitment, but do not follow through and do God's will, because it would involve loving and serving the people, getting down to their level and getting their hands dirty, at some little or perhaps even great cost. They preferred to maintain their haughty positions above the people, giving instructions. The chief priests and elders never had any intention on serving their communities in any way that would cause them discomfort, or challenge their privileged lives. They would not go into the vineyard to do the work God required of them.

This parable ties in well with that superb reading from Philippians chapter 2, one of my favourite writings of Paul.

Paul invites all who heard this text to imitate Christ's humility, to place the interests of others before their own. This is the concept of self-emptying, living such a generous and grace-filled life, that the desire to live with deep compassion, grace and mercy for others, and to act to make the lives of others better, leads to a costly emptying out of one's life. The technical term for this is kenosis.

Paul exhorts people to be like-minded, having the same love, being one on spirit and of one mind with Christ. People were to do things out of love, with tenderness and compassion, not out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, to do things for the interests of others.

This is a wonderful invitation, but also, frankly terrifying! Wonderful because it stirs the heart, fills the mind with images of people lifted out of their suffering, of living lives of shalom with one another. Terrifying because I know that I am flawed and am not able to imitate Christ's life. I cling on to the comforts of my life, my wealth, my status (such as it is), and yes, occasionally my desire not to get too involved in something messy. Paul set this incredibly high bar, imitate Christ!

All I can do is continue to pray and ask for God's will to be worked out in me, that I may act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

And just now, part of what I feel God is calling me to do is to continue to preach about the detrimental impact of humankind on God's beautiful creation, and

take whatever action I can to help reverse the very worst of the impacts, and enthuse and motivate others to do likewise by modelling some of what I believe, in my own small way, contributes to the healing of the earth.

How does this exhortation from Paul to each one of us affect you? Are you also excited, does it stir your heart to change your mind and do more of what Christ asks of us?

How is God calling you to pour out your love all of God's people, at this time and in this place, and during this season of Creation, what might be God be asking of you? May we all discern wisely what Christ may be asking of us, at this time.