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Sunday 27 September, 2020

Preacher: Rev. Hugh Perry

Breaking open the rock of innovative inspiration

Lesson: Exodus 17: 1-7 Matthew 21:23-32

Last summer our biggest city was echoing the cries of the Israelites as they cried out to Watercare that they could not wash their houses and their cars. I bet Phil Goff would have liked to strike a rocky outcrop in the Waitakere Ranges and have water flow freely into the city reservoir instead of having to contest his authority against the bureaucracy of Environment Waikato.

We live in times of complex leadership where needs and wants are balanced within complex processes and struggles to preserve face and avoid calamities. It is often tempting to look at the way primitive people functioned and wish we had leadership like Moses and Aaron who, with divine help, even Covid 19 could be just waved away with a magic staff and divine favour.

However, despite the brevity of scripture that lets solutions quickly flow out in front of us we mostly experience God working through people, and divine guidance is best appreciated with hindsight.

Furthermore, we can't really appreciate the difficulties Moses' people experienced, as Yuval Noah Harari explains in his book *Sapiens* because, even that much has been preserved time has also worn away much of the evidence of previous people

Harari even dismisses the comparison with communities living primitively today by suggesting that such communities are often 25% hunter, 25% gatherers and 50% anthropologists.

Nevertheless, there are lessons to be learned and a few years ago I watched a documentary about a tribe of hunter gatherers. In one incident a member of a hunting party shot a very small bird. Immediately the whole party gathered together, lit a fire, cooked the bird and shared it among the group. There would not have even been a mouthful each. But these were people living as a community in tune with creation as they had for thousands of years.

Primitive they people may have been, but they knew that cooperation was the key to survival in the wilderness because humanity is a cooperative species.

The group did not have a chief and decisions were made by consensus. What was apparent in the documentary was that very few decisions were needed because each person acted for the good of the whole group.

I didn't notice an anthropologist in the documentary but there was a presenter and therefore a film crew which suggests that particular tribe had endured the close scrutiny of contemporary science. However, that does not entirely negate their cooperative approach to life which appears very close to what I believe was Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God.

The Exodus people were led from slavery by Moses, so they had a leadership structure which scripture tells us was divinely inspired. Therefore, when they ran out of water, they did what 21st century people are inclined to do and complained to their leadership. Moses and Aaron rather than Watercare and the mayor.

I have often referred to this section of Exodus as the whingeing in the wilderness. They whinged about lack of food, then complained about the vegan diet and now they are afraid of dying of thirst. Furthermore, in each episode they compared their present predicament with an enhanced memory of the past.

In our present circumstances New Zealanders have largely been supportive of the leadership of science and politicians. But there has also been considerable reflection on the lost opportunities for travel, business, rugby, with the hospitality industry running dry.

However, things could have been worse as I discovered in Michael Kings, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*. King recorded a ship returning to New Zealand from Europe that was able to skip quarantine because one of the passengers was the Prime Minister returning from visiting the troops. Unfortunately, there was a stowaway on the ship called Spanish Flue that killed more New Zealanders than the First World War. Memory of that incident, along with the devastation we witness through modern communication, tell us that even in this election period our leadership, and those who aspire to lead have been, with a few exceptions surprisingly united in closing the sea of devastation behind us.

However, water was a divisive issue before we faced the pandemic and will be there with all its complexity when Covid 19 joins the Spanish Flu in our history. Our water whingeing has largely been about the declining quality, the adding of chlorine and the fact that other people may be making money from a resource we see as held in common.

I recently accompanied Jenny Hughey while she was door knocking in the local body elections and there were very few people we met, who didn't express a concern about water.

Looking further back in my own history to when I was living in Hamilton, Paula Southgate, at that time a regional councillor, came to a forum at St Stephens. She told us that Lake Taupo was beginning to cloud over because of excessive nutrients leaching from surrounding farmland and flowing into the lake. That posed a threat to tourism, but the lake water also flowed into the Waikato River and to household supplies in Hamilton and Auckland.

Since then Jenny has become the chair of ECan and Paula the mayor of Hamilton so, like Moses and Aaron, they are compelled to listen to people's complaints about lack of water, polluted water and commercialised water.

But whatever the chaos there is always hope and writing of this Exodus reading Maurice Andrew remembers that his grandparents had a text on the wall which read 'Streams in the desert' (Isaiah 35:6).

As his grandparents lived by the broadly flowing Waikato, and his family by the swift Rangitikei he doubted if any of them could have even imagined what a desert was like. But he highlighted the metaphorical impact of scripture suggesting everyone can have a wilderness experience in their life and it is often that wilderness where people are most refreshed.

The wilderness may be hostile, but it is there that the relationship with the environment can be renewed, both physically and metaphorically. ¹

That would certainly be our hope when we emerge from our pandemic wilderness and there have been numerous metaphorical rocks struck by human kindness and cooperation that assure us the wilderness journey will end in new beginnings.

¹ Maurice Andrew *The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: DEFT 1999)p. 105

Furthermore, many of the outpourings of hope we have seen have not been from remarkable individuals like Moses or even extraordinary wisdom from scientists with pink hair. Those things have certainly happened. But we have also been privileged to witness care for each other flowing into the wider community and it is that sort of spontaneous lovingkindness in contrast to leadership that protects its authority that is at the core of our Gospel reading.

In today's episode Jesus has moved from his ministry in Galilee to teaching in the temple and the temple elite came and questioned his authority.

They have a clear authority. The priests by birth, the scribes by training and the elders by wealth. They are the religious, social, economic, and political elite and their power and authority is also sanctioned by Rome.

Their question is understood as a trap because, if Jesus claims his own authority, he admits to having no institutional or cultural authority.

If he claims God's authority he blasphemes and violates their jurisdiction.

Jesus' quoting John the Baptist puts them in a difficult political situation, so they avoid it giving Jesus a precedence to avoid their question and turn the questioning on them. Jesus does this with the parable of the two sons and in answering his question about the parable they condemn themselves.

Like us and the people in our Exodus reading the first people to hear today's parable had expectations of their leadership.

The chief priests and the elders were the people called by God to care for the vineyard, to care for Israel. But the parable suggests that they have failed to fulfil that task.

Instead it is those who are seen as outsiders, the tax collectors and prostitutes, those who rejected Israel's ethical standards and purity code, that belatedly react to Jesus' preaching and build new lives within the Kingdom of God.

The chief priests and the elders could not exist in Jesus' vision of an ideal human society because, like the hunter gatherers I described, Jesus' vision of an ideal society was one where each member acts in the best interest of others.

Like many in leadership positions the parable points to a failing in governance that occurs when the priority becomes preserving authority rather than the wellbeing of the people they are called to lead.

Jesus had been healing people and restoring them as full members of the community. That was a challenge to those who enforced a strict purity code and placed them as the sole arbiters of people's repentance. The viability of the temple depended on people who had been excluded by the purity code seeking restoration by coming and sacrificing an animal that they purchased at the temple. It was commercialised salvation very like the sale of indulgences that blew the Christian Church apart when Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg.

The church certainly perceived Luther's challenge to religious authority in much the same way as the chief priests and the elders perceived Jesus. However, Luther was lucky that the secular political mood was more favourable than it was for Jesus.

Both the purity code and the indulgences were methods of funding and cementing the power of the ruling elite in dominating theocracies. What's more commercialised salvation still flows freely in some churches today but when Moses split open the rock, he allowed the water to flow freely and unmetered to the people.

Some of our political debate prior to the pandemic that is already flowing back into the election campaign has centred on the idea that water in our land flows freely for the use of everyone. Part of that debate is that some have taken water for their exclusive use and the activity of others has rendered water unusable for everyone.

Returning to the hunter gathers in the documentary several of the tribe expressed concern that the presenter of the documentary participated in a precarious climb of a very high tree to shake fruit from the top branches. Their concern was that he had not time to practise the skills required and feared he might fall and kill himself. He was an outsider but while he was sharing his life with them, they had empathy for him. That is an image of a truly human community, where those outsiders who were welcomed experience the empathy the group has for each other.

Everyone shared the fruit that fell from the tree just as everyone shared the water Moses released from the rock. It is sharing, empathy and a reverence for creator

and creation that has allowed humanity to move out of the Rift Valley of central Africa and across the globe.

Along that never-ending journey leadership has accumulated power by enslaving others forcing further migration into new wildernesses. Along the way the search for substance developed new skills until we reach the saturation of human population, we find ourselves in. We live in a time when we face increased migration and a shortage of wilderness. We seem to face the alternative of complete annihilation through megalomania, severe culling of populations by mutant viruses and bacteria or even the collapse of the very biosphere that keeps all life precariously balanced.

But our religious scripture, the Exodus episode and our Gospel reading gives us hope and a road map that reminds us we all have the possibility of new beginnings. Those who hold leadership positions may well procrastinate and negotiate, bluff and bluster to the brink of disaster.

But in Jesus' promise of a divine realm we all have the opportunity to break open the rock of innovative inspiration and let the water of new life flow into our world.

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