

## Sermon: 1 October 2023



**Exodus: 17:1-7**

**Matthew: 21:23-32**

In today's Exodus episode the people complain about water and complaints about water have been a feature of number of election campaigns.

Also relevant to the general election is our reading from Matthew where the temple authority challenges Jesus' authority. In reply, Jesus uses a parable to challenge their past achievements and current policy and thereby question authority.

That is a challenge for democratically elected governments and totalitarian regimes alike. It is also a challenge for the church in all its multitude of organisational structures.

Returning to the Exodus reading we should also remember the previous complaints people brought to Moses and a pattern emerges that seems most relevant to a month where we will choose our next government.

The people who complained to Moses maintained that their past slavery was better than the freedom of the wilderness where they had to fend for themselves and the promised land seemed too far in the future.

In this election, as with elections in the past, we have aspiring politicians wanting to take us to the promised land and an electorate that seems to want to return to the slavery of the past.

The trouble is, just like the people on the wilderness journey, we only remember the security we have experienced and not whatever slavery the past dragged us through. The past was filled with sunny days and cold winters are easily forgotten while childhood illness are overlooked.

I also remember that when I was a small boy in Stokes Valley, we didn't have our car stolen. That had less to do with it being a more law-abiding society and more the fact that we didn't have a car.

For those who did have cars in our street, potholes were not an issue. That was because a grader used to run up and down our road on a regular basis and spread the gravel about. That was also great excitement for small boys.

We didn't have big debates about three waters either. Our water came from our own dam that dad had made through an arrangement with the landowner in a small valley up the hill. Dad had put manuka poles over it to stop sheep and possums falling in and it was full of kōura that are filter feeders as well as scavengers, so the water was kept clean. But Mum, as a past Girl Guide, said no drinking it without boiling. We also had a creek running through our place which was great for small boys to fossick in. But the water was suspect because some of the septic tanks further up the valley had overflows that went into the creek. So I wasn't allowed to catch the eels and eat them.

When we moved to Levin we had sealed roads complete with potholes. We also had town supply water that turned brown with heavy rain.

By that time, we had a Morris Minor which we kept in a locked garage because the boys from the borstal at Hokio Beach used to escape and steal people's cars.

We all had knives of various sorts and I can remember kids bringing luger pistols to school and I hope they had their firing pins removed like the rifles we had to march around with at high school.

Certainly, with military drill, corporal punishment in schools and capital punishment administered by the courts authority was clearly defined in the past that I remember.

But I still didn't learn to spell and was relentlessly bullied at my early primary school. Furthermore, enough teachers told me I was useless to make me feel there was little point in having a second go at university entrance. Therefore, I didn't risk a university education until I was in my fifties.

Authority was certainly defined in Jesus' time and had some similarities to our time. For Jews, the temple was the symbol of authority. It was a combination of the cathedral, the Beehive, the law courts and the city council chambers. Furthermore, it was sanctioned and under the protection of Rome with all its military might and interesting forms of execution.

Like any aristocracy, the temple priests held their authority by birth. The scribes, like civil servants, academics, accountants and economists, held their authority by training.

The temple elders were not well-respected Presbyterians. They held their authority because they had heaps of money and I suspect they were in it for themselves.

But such religious, social, economic and political certainly marginalised a large portion of society. Furthermore, the destruction of the temple in AD 70 reminds us of a crushed rebellion that must have been brewing in Jesus' time.

So, Jesus confronting the disempowering honour shame code and suggesting that people should care for each other, was a bother to those in authority. His insistence that sins should be forgiven not punished would have made the authorities very nervous and they also seemed to need to protect God from such heresy. So, they confronted Jesus. In answer to that confrontation Jesus told the parable of the two sons.

In his commentary on this passage Bill Loader makes the point that the vineyard is a standard image of Israel. As workers in that vineyard, the chief priest and elders are set in contrast to the prostitutes and tax collectors. The chief priest and elders engage in the rhetoric of obedience but fail to do God's will. The prostitutes and tax collectors disqualify themselves by their behaviour, but then turn to God and turn their lives around.

Turning to God and trusting God is the common element in both readings. Authority that ignores the divine love for all people is authority that needs to be questioned.

Furthermore, the Exodus reading points out that God is always with people as they make the wilderness journey of freedom. Every journey encounters an unfamiliar wilderness, and every human journey holds the promise in an unknown future, Moses and Aaron provided leadership, but they acknowledged that they owed their leadership to God. The whole people were people of the creator and therefore sustained by creation.

Furthermore, the story reinforces the reality that humanity is a communal species and acting together is the way people achieve results. Certainly, the story portrays the whole congregation complaining against their leadership, but they complained as a group.

The people faced a crisis over the availability of water, and they acted collectively to petition their leaders. Their leaders understood that the wilderness is a place where new skills need to be learned and the example of the stories in Exodus is that it is co-operation, not competition, that solves the problems and allows the whole congregation to survive.

Was it a miracle that water rushed from the rock or did Moses and Aaron have past experience of wilderness geography and desert springs? Either way, providing water when most needed, was a miracle.

What is most significant is they did not propose a user pay way of allocating scarce water or seek to make a profit from whatever led them to discover the water flowing from the rock. Furthermore, they continued the journey rather than accept the security the water undoubtedly offered.

That is all something to keep in mind as we assess the leadership that must take us on our future journey into the wilderness of climate change and economic recovery from a worldwide pandemic.

Jesus' message was all about a new future and the way to that future was in caring for each other and looking for forgiveness and new beginnings. But that was too scary for the established leadership. They wanted to secure their position by camping by the flowing water of traditional knowledge and established authority.

In perusing that authority Matthew tells us that 'When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said 'by what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' (Matthew 21:23)

In reaction to that challenge Jesus tells a parable that suggests that the established leadership has failed to fulfil that task. Furthermore, it suggests it is the tax collectors and prostitutes, those who rejected Israel's ethical standards and purity code, but belatedly reacted to Jesus' preaching and so build new lives within Jesus' divine realm.

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

But the priority for the chief priests and the elders was their authority rather than the wellbeing of the people they were supposed 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. Furthermore, the viability of the temple depended on people who had been excluded by the purity code and came seeking restoration by sacrificing an animal that they bought at the temple. The system was very like the purchase of indulgences that blew the Christian church apart when Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517. That is 506 years ago at the end of this month and a challenge very like Jesus' challenge to the chief priests and the elders.

Luther was lucky that the political mood was more favourable than it was for Jesus. The Prince of Wittenburg wanted to improve local infrastructure not build a church in Rome. Furthermore, having Luther in the University of Wittenberg attracted fee paying foreign students.

Both the purity code and the indulgences were methods used in a dominating theocracy to fund and cement the power of the ruling elite by taxing the poor.

That is totally opposite to Moses splitting open the rock and allowing water to flow freely to all the people. Furthermore, Moses splitting open the rock and allowing water to flow freely is a metaphor that echoes Jesus' parable where promise is not necessarily fulfilled but the possibility is opened for others to fulfil the promise in the future. That is what we all must look for in whatever wilderness we journey through towards whatever future calls us.

Our readings suggest that it is sharing, empathy and a reverence for both creator and creation that has allowed humanity to move across the globe.

Along that never ending journey, leadership has accumulated power by enslaving others. That has forced further migration into new wildernesses. Along the way the search for subsistence has developed new skills until we reached the saturation of human population, we find ourselves in.

We live in a time when we face increased migration and a shortage of wilderness. So now we seem to face the alternative of complete annihilation, the collapse of the very biosphere that keeps all life precariously balanced.

But we are a resurrection faith, and the Gospel always offers hope and new beginnings.

The hope our Gospel reading gives us is that we all have the opportunity to begin again. 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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