

John Docherty, 19 March, 2017

We thirst

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

This question is at the heart of the two passages that were read this morning : Exodus 17 (the water from the rock), and John 4 (the Samaritan woman at the well).

The question is at the heart of both passages, but I think I hear the emphasis on two different words.

For the Israelites, the emphasis is on the word “among” : “Is the Lord *among* us, or not?”

For the Samaritan woman at the well, I think I hear the emphasis on the word “us” : “Is the Lord among *us*, or not?”

Let's start with the Exodus passage.

The people are thirsty; they are at risk of death, along with their cattle; they would seem to have a legitimate bone to pick with Moses : “why have you brought us out here into the desert to die? At least back in Egypt we had food and water, even if life was rough”

Moses strikes the rock with his rod, as commanded by God, and the water flows.

In Numbers, chapter 20, we have almost the same scenario being acted out again : the people are thirsty, they accuse Moses of bringing them into the desert to die, and Moses strikes the rock, causing the water to flow.

But in the Numbers passage, God doesn't tell Moses to strike the rock. Moses is told instead to simply tell the rock to spring water, not to strike it with the rod.

In the Numbers passage, God is then very angry with Moses, and it's because of this act of striking the rock that God punishes him by telling him he will not be allowed to enter the land to be given to the people of Israel. It's a harsh punishment.

But the people are not punished. The place is given a cautionary name – Meribah –

because the people quarrelled and “tested the Lord”, but the people themselves are not punished. It's almost as if their questioning is seen to have a certain reasonableness about it : “*is* the Lord among us or not?”

But this question is a bit of a recurring theme with the Israelites. If we go back a chapter or so in Exodus, we find them murmuring already, just three days after crossing the Red Sea. Chapter 15 verse 22f : “Then Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur; they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water because it was bitter; therefore it was named “Marah”. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' And he cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.”

They then leave that area, and come to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. They camp there for an unspecified time, then move on to the wilderness of Sin. We're told they arrived there 'on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt'; so about six weeks into the wanderings that will eventually see them spend forty years in the wilderness.

So on this occasion, they famously yearn after “the fleshpots of Egypt”, and claim they would rather have died by God's hand there with full bellies, than die slowly out here in the desert.

So what does God do? He sends quails, and rains down manna on them and they are able to eat to their hearts' content. God answers their prayer, and meets these essential needs.

But, once again, when they move on from the wilderness of Sin, we find them here in this passage of chapter 17 murmuring, wondering why they are short of water, and asking “Is the Lord with us or not?”

The question is certainly presented here as a critical / accusing question. In other words, there's a tone of aggression about it; a sense that God (or Moses) is falling short. The question isn't actually put directly to God – it's put to Moses and Aaron, and they are the ones who claim that *God* is the one being put to the test, not *them*.

And yet, on a purely human level, these people who have put their trust in God, have also put their trust in Moses, and they are beginning to wonder : “were we

naive? Is this man really a prophet? Is the Lord *among* us or not? Is Moses a fraud?"

On one level, the questioning may seem out of place, given that they have seen the plagues brought down on the Egyptians; they've seen the Red Sea parted; they've now been given manna to eat. Surely it's obvious that God is with them.

And yet, they're thirsty. They don't have enough water. There's no obvious reason why God would want them to suffer if they are truly under God's protection. So why don't they have enough water?

Is the problem with Moses? Is he viewed as some kind of magician who can wield his staff and cause miraculous things to happen? Is he just a Hebrew Merlin who can call up supernatural forces that he calls 'God', but who has limits to what he can do?

And so the people call for a renewed affirmation that the Lord is still with them. "Prove to us that you haven't just lured us out here to the wilderness to die. *Is the Lord among us or not?*"

This question is a recurring theme in Exodus, but it's also a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament. The Israelites are constantly moving from one crisis to another; and constantly asking, explicitly or implicitly, *Is the Lord among us or not?*

They *do* get affirmation from time to time that they are, in fact, God's chosen people, but not without occasionally first echoing the words of Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof: "I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?"

This question – is God among us? - is one that I hear as a cry of the heart: Have we been abandoned? Where was God when we needed help? Why isn't God protecting us?

It's a very human question from people who are trying to be faithful and obedient, and who expected something different from God.

The same question is hidden in the exchange between the Samaritan woman and Jesus.

The Samaritans believed in Yahweh, were trying to be faithful to what they understood was expected of them, and they worshipped on their sacred mountain while the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem.

So when the woman asks Jesus whether our mountain or Jerusalem is the right place to worship God, she's basically asking the same question the Israelites put to Moses, but with the emphasis on a different word : “Is the Lord among *us*, or not?”

In other words, “*Is God with US or with THEM?*”

That, too, is a very human question. “Are we the good guys or the bad guys?”

“Are we getting it right?”

“Are we in, or are we out?”

As a good and faithful Jew, one would expect Jesus to answer her question with a clear affirmation that Jerusalem is the chosen place of worship; that the Samaritans haven't quite hit the mark; that if they want to be acceptable to God, they must basically become full members of the Jewish Faith.

He *does* say that salvation is of the Jews, and that the Samaritans are muddling about in some ways : “You worship what you don't know; we worship what we know”.

But he immediately follows that up with something that basically declares : “but that's all in the past. From here on in God will be worshipped in spirit and in truth. It's no longer a question of *where* you worship, but rather a question of *how* you worship.”

But that question of how you worship is no longer a question of *us* and *them*; no longer a matter of *this* ritual practice and *that* ritual practice; *this* holy place and *that* holy place; but rather a question of an authentic thirsting after God.

This, I think, was also a part of the message of the sixteenth century Anabaptists : a setting aside of the trappings of “mystery” where access to God is concerned, and an embrace of the possibility that each of us is can enter into God's presence in spirit – we don't need temples, and stained glass, and a holy of holies.

Their conviction was that baptism is not an act that confers Christianity on

someone, but a symbolic act that reflects something that has already taken place.

Communion is not dependent on a priest who can convert the bread and wine into the literal body and blood of Christ, but a symbolic sharing of the basic elements of life and hospitality in community.

We don't seek God's forgiveness for wrongs done to another by confessing to a member of the clergy, we seek God's forgiveness in the forgiving arms of the one we have wronged.

When we authentically thirst for God, we can expect to be given the water we need.

If I can go back to the Exodus passage for a moment, I wonder if there isn't a hint of this move from the instruments of ritual to the worship of God in spirit and in truth.

In the first narrative of Moses bringing water from the rock, he is told by God to strike the rock with his staff. The people are then, I suppose, expected to associate the power in the staff with the one who has brought them out of Egypt.

In the second narrative in Numbers, Moses is told to simply speak to the rock in order for it to bring forth water. He strikes it instead, and is punished as a result.

I wonder if this punishment is, in part, because God is trying to impress on the people that their trust is to be placed in God, who can bring water out of a stone with just a word. Magical wands, in the form of a staff, are not needed.

What is needed is an authentic thirsting after God, in spirit and in truth.