

Arnhem/Nijmegen, September 27th 2020.

Readings: Ex. 17.1-7

Ps. 78.1-4, 12-16

Phil. 2.1-13

Mat. 21.23-32

Bread and water. The Israelites have been traveling through the desert for some weeks. Every morning they find their daily supply of manna waiting for them. Following the guidance of the LORD through Moses they make their way down south, where they intend to worship God at mount Horeb. Water will have been in short supply, anyway, but then they come to a place where there is no water at all. What a disillusion. It's not just that you can't quench your thirst. You cannot prepare a meal either. And imagine your children in danger of dehydration. Imagine having your period without any chance of washing yourself and your clothes. And imagine the pathetic bleating of the thousands of sheep, knowing that this will go on through the night because you cannot drench them. It's enough to make anyone panic. So they ambush Moses with their complaints and their accusations. Things are becoming heated, and Moses cries out to God, fearing for his life.

God hears his people. He hears the panic and the fears behind their aggressive behaviour. He knows it will take time before it will really sink in that he is always there for them. As Jos said last week: the people are not punished for their grumbling, they are rewarded.

Go to the rock of Horeb, he says to Moses. Strike it with your staff, and then see what happens. Moses obeys, and the water gushes from the rock and the people can drink their fill.

Now here is one of the secrets that desert people have to know in order to survive. Water from the rock in itself is a natural phenomenon. Sedimentary rocks in the desert are known to have these little pockets of water just below the surface, betraying their presence by drops or tricklets seeping out. If you break through the surface, using a stone or a stick, you can release the water that has collected there.

So in itself the water from the rock is not miraculous, although it may have looked like that to people for whom the desert was new territory. The miracle is in the quantity. A stream that is sufficient for thousands of people and their livestock. A natural phenomenon becomes a vehicle for God's miraculous saving work.

In his letter to the Corinthians St. Paul explains how this rock is a symbol of Christ, who gives us living water to quench our spiritual thirst. If we connect this to his words in his letter to the Philippians, we find an interesting parallel with the little water pockets in the desert rocks. Paul puts great emphasis on the fact that Jesus became a human being – a natural phenomenon, if I may be so bold. But from him came fountains of living and life-giving water, promises of healing and reconciliation, promises of peace and a kingdom where nobody will go hungry or thirsty. Water in astonishing abundance.

We usually identify with the grumbling Israelites, knowing how often we ourselves grumble and struggle to trust God. But today let us try to place ourselves elsewhere in the story: in these rocks with their hidden pockets of water. If we can see Christ in them, then we can also see ourselves in them. Out of the believers' heart shall flow rivers of living water, says Jesus in John 7. We are natural phenomena, with all that this entails. Created beings, subject to all the limitations of our nature, of creational laws, of time and space. But we have been given this living water, the life of God. And so we in our turn have become like these little pockets of water in the rocks. We all have been given the ability to refresh each other when life looks like a desert journey. By God's grace our own little supply may become a surprising stream of life-giving refreshment for somebody else.

Yesterday I made my solemn vows. Among many other things I promised that I would seek nourishment from the Scriptures, and be faithful in prayer. In other words: I promised to keep the little pocket that I am full of living water. By prayer, by reading the Scriptures, by meditation. I certainly hope nobody will hit me over the head with a stick, but I do hope that when anyone needs a sip on their journey, God will bless that little sip, so it will feel like a refreshing fountain of water from God.

And that is for a reason. Because the ordination liturgy didn't stop there. Deacons are to seek nourishment from the Scriptures; they are also to study

them with God's people, that the whole Church may be equipped to live out the gospel in the world. Deacons are to refresh themselves, so that they can refresh others, so that all of us together can refresh the world. Keeping your water reservoir filled is not just a task for deacons and priests. It is a responsibility we all have. We all need to be open to the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, and so keep our pockets filled for anybody whose wells have run dry.

God's abundant life is given to us, individually and as a community, for a purpose. Not to be kept for ourselves and to ourselves, to create a cosy spiritual bubble. It is meant to flow from us and through us to the rest of the world.

And so today's story also has to make us aware of all the many people on this earth that literally cry for water. Those who have every right to grumble. Who see their rivers and lakes polluted by large oil companies. Those whose fishing grounds are being poisoned by pesticides or chemical waste. Those whose water resources are confiscated and used for producing cheap coca cola, or for growing the roses we want to send each other in December.

I made my solemn vows for them, too. God hears their grumbling. He hears the justified panic and fear behind their complaints. What does he do about it? All over the world he has provided little, often hidden water pockets. You, me, us, and so many others. And he gives us the responsibility to respond. He wants us to be touched, to be really hit by the misery of our fellow human beings, and to open the fountains of our hearts to them. We may feel overwhelmed by the misery; it may make us feel small, insignificant, helpless. The little water we can hold – how does that help the world, all those millions of suffering people?

But does love not conquer all fears? Let us trust in God. Let us trust in the promise that it is his life-giving streams that flows through us. That he will bless and multiply the little droplets that we produce. Let us keep ourselves filled. And then – from each and every one of us individually, and from us as a community – may the justice of God flow like a river and his righteousness as an ever-flowing stream, bringing healing in our broken world.

Amen.