

NEAR BUT HIDDEN

Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. Exodus 17:6

An American tourist posted on u-tube a shaky grainy film as his Arabic guide told our Old Testament lesson of Exodus 17 in heavily accented English from an open tour bus of the area purported to be where the Israelites wandered in the wilderness by the “waters of Meribah”. All you could see were white blanched rocks. Dust was stirred up. Heat radiated through the uninsulated metal roof of the bus. Any zeal I may have had for visiting some of these holy sites was tempered by the reality of heat, dust, danger and the expense of it all.

There didn’t appear to be anything there for the Israelites either. There were the rocks, dust and deprivation. Help seemed a long way off. The Promised Land seemed but a dream. And they were thirsty. There are some places in nature, by natural beauty alone where we might say “God is with us”. There are man-made locations where perhaps a bell rings breaking the silence of sunlight glittering through stain glass and we feel as if we might touch heaven itself. But this was not that place. There were the rocks, dust, danger and above all the thirst.

But God has always proven himself to be near, even if he is hidden to our natural senses. If there is a lesson to learn today this is one of them. Many of us find ourselves wandering as the Israelites were. Everything around us just looks ordinary. Even here we wonder, “Is the Lord among us or not”? You look to the altar and there is nothing to be seen today. When there is something to be seen it isn’t exactly awe inspiring to our natural reason. There is common bread and wine under white linen. There is ordinary water under cover here (pointing to baptismal font). There is just paper and board put together as a book here (pointing to lectern).

We are tempted to sin asking the question, “Is the Lord among us or not?” When the Israelites asked the question we know what happened next. The Lord responded, “Take some of the elders with you. Take in your hand the staff which you used to strike the Nile. Stand before the rock in Horeb and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it and the people will drink”.

God had demonstrated his presence to a doubting people. Water flowed from the rock. It flowed in dramatic fashion to be recorded in the song of the psalms (78:15, 16)

¹⁵*He split rocks in the wilderness
and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.*

¹⁶*He made streams come out of the rock
and caused waters to flow down like rivers.*

More dramatic perhaps than the sight of the rushing waters where before there was no water is the spiritual meaning and foreshadowing of another deeper greater living water in Christ. From 1 Corinthians 4: 10 we know that the Rock was Christ. Christ came. He lived among us. He appeared ordinary. There is no beauty or majesty to attract us to him” proclaimed the prophet Isaiah. To the crowds and the Roman centurions involved in his crucifixion there was a spirit of taunting as they chided him to reveal his majesty. They asked “If you are the Son of God come down”. All they saw was the marred figure of an unfortunate man.

The Roman law, in the form of a soldier’s spear came with full force to strike him. What happened next is the fulfilment to what Moses spoke of. Out of the Rock foretold by Moses, “Out came the water and the blood”. This is what is recorded by the eyewitnesses to the event in John 19:34. *But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.* John 19:33-35

Now this was an incredible sight. It was more incredible than the miracle Psalm 78 spoke of. When water and blood came from his “Riven Side” we know that this was not normal. Ancient Church Fathers and even more modern commentators with medical knowledge agree. This was not normal for water to flow forth from a dead man where blood should have congealed. Yet it did indeed flow along with the blood as a sign. It was a sign that he who died was special. He was truly the Son of God. He was the propitiation for our sins. And so we read in 1 John 5:7 “For there are three that testify: ⁸the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree”. He gives us a sign as to how such blessings would be bestowed through the sacraments.

It is clearly a sign of God’s grace given to us in the waters of Holy Baptism and the blood in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. At Easter, but also during the celebration of Holy Communion we often sing “At the Lamb’s High Feast” we sing. That’s hymn #633 in your hymnals and I encourage you to look there now or listen very carefully because the hymn gives a most rich and deep theological commentary on John 19:33-35 which is the fulfilment of today’s Old Testament lesson.

*At the Lamb’s High Feast we sing
Praise to our victorious King
Who has washed us in the tide,
Flowing from his pierced side. (Well that’s Baptism)*

*Praise we Him whose love divine
Gives his sacred blood for wine,
Gives his body for the feast,
Christ the victim, Christ the priest (Well that’s a reference to the Lord’s Supper)*

It is an incredible sacrifice which Jesus had offered up upon the cross. It was a death totally within his control. The whole reason that the soldier had thrust forth his spear is that he couldn’t believe that he had already died. When the centurion had seen him breath his last and say to his heavenly Father we can only imagine the amazement of those experienced in seeing

such a death hearing a man speak in an audible and understandable enough tone for the Gospel writers to record his last word "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit". At the foot of the cross where just a short time ago soldiers were gambling away the garments of Christ like it was just another run of the mill execution of ordinary thieves the Centurion now seeing the manner in which Christ died and the water and the blood which flowed forth could respond with the only plausible explanation: "Truly, this man is the Son of God".

From all that which was at first so seemingly plain and ordinary came something special, helpful and even glorious. The lesson that all things are not as they appear carries over from the waters of Meribah at Horeb to the Christ at Calvary to the Sacraments celebrated before you.

Now we do not have the Lord's Supper for you today which seems so strange to miss. Neither do we have a Baptism proper. But we do have a Confirmation. Now what is that? It is really a rite focused on our baptism. Every week we are encouraged to come making the sign of the cross before confession as a remembrance of our baptism. But in confirmation there is a more formal acknowledgement of it. The candidate wears a white alb. He is clothed in the righteousness of Christ. He acknowledges that he has been instructed in the faith. He pledges his adherence to our confession of faith as contained in Scripture and the Catechism. Living out his baptismal faith he pledges that he will "suffer all even death" rather than fall away from it.

Now that is powerful. Sacrificial living from those who seem on initial inspection to be so ordinary is powerful. When the apostles were preaching the observers were amazed at their message despite the simplicity of their words. But they had then noticed that they had been with Jesus. And the ordinary ones were turning the world upside down.

All of us as we remain connected to Jesus may participate in this. It is earth shattering work. The apostle Paul reminds us

not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, (1 Cor. 1:26 ff.)

Now that is something. What work from that which seems nothing! "Shame the wise". "Shame the strong" "Bring to nothing the things that are". It's downright revolutionary. And it is God's gift.

May we never become discouraged by what we see around us: Our circumstances; our poverty; our weaknesses? These are things that the world might dwell on but the Christian must not. Our strength is in the Lord. Our hope is in him. May we dwell on these things.

In the name of Jesus we pray.

Amen.