

All Saints Talk for Sunday 25 June 2023

'Hearing and obeying' Stephen Girling

The 9th in our series 'Journey to the Promised Land'

Readings: *Numbers 20:2-13, (Water from the rock)*

1 Corinthians 10:1-14.

I would like you to pause for a moment and look back over the different seasons of your life. Some of us has more seasons behind us and others. Is there one particular time of your life You look back with a certain fondness and think, oh, yeah, I'd love to be back there? Just pause for a moment and think just close your eyes and think, what was it about that season?

God is good in every season. The Israelites looked back, believe it or not, as they wandered in the in the wilderness, towards the promised land, they looked back on the season, where they were in Egypt, could you believe it, in captivity, because at least in captivity, they knew where their next meal was coming from, where the drink was coming from. And here they are, hungry and thirsty and they complain to their leadership, they complained to Moses and Aaron. And we heard it in a reading. So Moses and Aaron go and seek God at the tent meeting, they fall down on their face, because God is a holy God, and they are humbled before him. And lo and behold, God's glory appears and he speaks to them, he tells them what to do. Take the staff, assemble the congregation, you and your brother, Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Your translation said, speak to the rock. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them. Thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock. So far, so good. People complained, Moses and Aaron sought God, and they heard God, and God has given them solution. So, if you like your perfect prayer, isn't it, that you hear God, and God gives you a solution. The 'staff' in what God says when God says take the staff, the staff probably refers to the staff in Numbers chapter 17, which is a reminder of priestly authority. It's a reminder of the authority that God has bestowed upon Moses and Aaron, to lead his people as priests.

Moses and Aaron come before God, they represent the people to God in their complaint, their murmuring, they hear from God, and they come to the people and represent the voice of God to the people as they stand before the rock. And God says to them, as they come before Him, you shall bring water out of the rock, out of that rock, which rock? which rock of all the rocks? I remember once traveling in the Negev desert on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. And being told by our guide as we looked at a whole lot of rocks, that occasionally there, you get a fissure in the rock, that over years and decades, even centuries, just gradually, very, very slowly, leeches out with the salts from the water behind the rock. So this is a clue to shepherds and others, that there is hidden water behind the rock. So probably it's such a rock that Moses and Aaron were standing before. Now, as Moses and Aaron stood there, and as Moses had this staff representing their authority, as priest before God, I'm sure Moses would have recalled the previous times when he had had the staff in his hand. So for example, the Red Sea, what did God say there? Hold your staff, raise your hand and the sea will be parted and lo and behold, the Red Sea was parted and the people went through. Exodus 17 recalls a time, previous to this, when the Israelites were at Mount Horrib, thirsty again, and God on that occasion says, strike the rock.

But here in Numbers 20 In this instance, the instruction is simply take the staff before the eyes of the people, command the rock, speak to the rock, to yield its water. I don't know about you, but I have every sympathy with Moses. Imagine you're the murmuring people, I'm sure you're not, but imagine you're the murmuring people and here we have a rock and I'm Moses, thinking, okay, 'rock yield your water'. Already I can begin to feel the murmuring among the people. Who does he think he is? I begin to sweat. My armpits get wet. And I'm thinking, I shall even allow to rock yield your water. Nothing happens. And so it goes on like this, in the face of the murmuring of the people. And then finally Moses, thinks oh, dammit and slashes, strikes the rock with his staff, as he's done before, and lo and behold, water gushes out, and the people and their livestock, slake their thirst. What seems to have happened is this Moses, having heard from God, lost patience with God and took matters into his own hands. And strangely enough, it seems harsh to us, but because of his disobedience God tells him "You and Aaron will not lead my people into the promised land".

Now it's not uncommon for us to take matters into our own hands, is it? What do you reckon? It's not uncommon. I'm certainly guilty. And actually the Bible is full of instances: I think of think of Abraham and Sarah, there they are in old age, God has promised to them very clearly that they'll have descendants. Well, how do you have descendants? Well, you need a child, you need a baby? And particularly a son in that time. And there they are, in old age childless. So what do they do? Sarah loses patience and she says to Abraham 'look, it's not going to happen, so you take Hagar, my slave girl, you sleep with her, and have a baby by her. And lo and behold, Ishmael is born and things don't go too well there, do they? She takes matters into her own hands. Or Peter, think of Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is arrested. He literally takes matters into his own hands, he gets his sword out and he strikes the slave of the high priest and slices his ear off.

Mind you, when I think of Abraham. Abraham, Mount Moriah. God says to him, I want you to sacrifice your son, Isaac. Abraham follows through. Right to the very, very last minute, where God stays his hand and stops him killing his son. And God says, I now know that you fear God, since you've not withheld your son, your only son from me? Would we be willing to really wait patiently on God and not take matters into our own hands? Moses bowed to the pressure, took matters into his own hands. Why do we do that? Why are we inclined to do our own thing, rather than wait patiently for God for His timing. I suspect that some of us only half listen to God. In practice, we do what we've always previously done. We know how to fix it. We'll just do what we did before. Moses previously struck the rock, 'oh, I'll strike it again this time, they'll sort it that'll stop the murmuring'. I suspect many of us just half listen to God, and then we're off on one, we decide we'll just do our own thing. Most of us have got used to having things in an instant. Most of us are not very good at waiting, patiently. We've lost the art of delayed gratification. Those of us who are parents with young children, know how hard it is to say to your children, wait, or no, you've gotta wait for that. So we take matters into our own hands. we don't like to wait. We live in an instant world, we know that. Many of us, I suspect, are insecure in our relationship with God, and in ourselves. So when we hear the murmuring inside our heads, or when we hear the murmuring of other people who have expectations on us, we think I'd better do something. I better sort this out myself now. Thank you very much God, but I'll take control. I take matters into my own hands. How patient are you if you see no evidence of God acting? Let's do a little show of hands.

Okay, imagine the scale here, 1 to 10. 10 is very patient. Okay? 1 is very inclined to take matters into my own hands. Okay, I'm gonna ask you in a moment, whether you inclined towards 10 or inclined towards one, okay. It's fine, nobody's gonna mark you, it's just a sort of indication. How many of us are inclined towards being very patient and stick with God, waiting a long time for God to act? How many inclined in this direction? Take a note of these people, they may be few, but they're important people in the life of a church. How many of us are inclined towards this end? A lot of us aren't very sure or we? Most of us, I can see, are inclined towards this end. We're inclined to take things into our own hands. So that people went away. Their thirst was quenched, and I'm sure they were impressed with Moses. And they completely missed the point. Moses was not the point. The water was not the point. The moment we fixate on the thing, or the person who has done the thing, and not on God, is the moment we've committed idolatry. We substituted the 'thing' for God. I imagined that people went back to their tents saying, 'Look what Moses did. Isn't he amazing? What a leader'. When they should have been saying, look what God did. Wow. He is Holy. The Word Bible Commentary puts it like this. It says, 'By striking the rock and not leaving it to God, Moses has robbed God of the glory and honour due only to him and taken it upon himself. This is sin. The murmuring of the people tests the patience of Moses to the limit, and he fails to test and pays for his sin.'

Contrast the apostle Paul, the author of our second reading. In 2 Corinthians 6 Paul lists the trials and temptations he's been through. He lists the murmurings, the batterings, things that have happened in his life. It's a tough list, the things he's had to put up with, and he says this at the end of it all, 'I'm sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, I'm poor, yet making many rich, I have nothing, but possess everything.' So when you're patiently waiting on God and you can say, I have nothing of my own resources to give, it's the right place to be.

We've just sung about dwelling in God's presence. We were talking together just before the service about being willing to be still before God. Enjoy his presence with absolutely no agenda. That's what Paul is saying. Sorrowful yet always rejoicing, poor, yet making many rich, I have nothing. I have absolutely nothing, but possess everything. He was secure in his relationship with God and with himself to continue in obedience to God and resist the murmuring and stand fast against all the crushing things that came into his life.

He was secure in Christ, and he says he makes this remarkable statement: he says, 'our ancestors drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.' He was seeing the eternal Christ there, the Christ who was, and is, and is to come; was as much there with Moses at the physical rock as he was there with Paul. Paul's security was being in Christ. In Exodus 19:4, after Moses and led the people out of Egypt, God says to him this, he says, 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians'. God it this remarkable miracle. 'You've seen what I did for the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles wings, and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you should be my treasured possession. Out of all the peoples'. I brought you to myself. That's the point. That's the only point of everything that happens, that comes to pass in your life and mine; that we are in Christ, and that Christ might draw us to God himself, that we might know we are his treasured possession. Having nothing but possessing everything. Everything else, including water from a rock, including answered prayer, including mountaintop experiences, including amazing charismatic experiences. Everything else is only an intimation, an intention to bring us to God. Let's not substitute the 'theme', for God.

I suspect that's why we don't see many miracles in the West. Because God knows, if he gave us a miracle, we'd only want another one. And another one. And we'd fixate on the miracle. Well, actually, the miracle is not the thing. The water wasn't the thing. God did it that we might come to him. Pippa and I, in our role as Area Dean and Lay Dean, we need a miracle. You may be aware that in this deanery, because of financial pressures by 2027 we've got to reduce from 22 paid clergy, like me, in the deanery, to 17. We will lose five Vicars, whilst prioritising the poor parishes, what we call the magnificent parishes. So we've got to lose five full time vicars. So five parishes, which have always had their vicar will by 2027 be sharing a vicar with somebody else, not having their own vicar. You might be thinking, wow, that's tough. I mean, imagine a year ago when you were in a vacancy, if Pippa and I had come to you and said, I'm sorry, but you'll have no replacement for Mark, you won't have your own vicar live in the vicarage.

We're going to sell the vicarage and you will have a vicar, but that Vicar will be a share of the vicar next door here or there. Would you have murmured?

We murmur because we know what we want. We murmur because we know what our church has always had. We murmur because we know what we've paid for.

We murmur because we know what we need. Well, the point is, actually it's Christ's Church. We're one worshipping congregation here amongst 35 in the Anglican Church in this city. It's Christ's Church. We're stewards of God's money. It's not our money. We are his treasured possession.

So please pray for the church, please pray for us, and for the bishop, thankfully, finally, it's his decision. But I do feel like we're waiting on a miracle. I do feel like we're Moses in front of that rock, where the temptation is to do something in our own human strength. When all we can do is provisionally say, Lord, 'we think you're saying this', and consult and talk to people. The temptation to take matters into our own hands is significant. Please pray.

Listen to how RS Thomas puts it in this poem is called 'kneeling'. It's a beautiful poem. And this poem is talking about the meaning being in the waiting. It's not saying that because you wait, you'll eventually get the answer. He's saying that the meaning is in the waiting, because it's in the waiting that we discover, Oh, it's okay, I'm in Christ.

RS Thomas, 'Kneeling'. Moments of great calm, kneeling before an altar of wood in a stone church, in summer, waiting for the God to speak? Prompt me, God, but not yet. When I speak, though, it be you who speak through me, something is lost. The meaning is in the waiting.

Seeing in the patient waiting, we learn what it means to be secure in Christ, to be satisfied in him, to be God's treasured possession. Everything else we learn is straw. It's meaningless at the end of the day.

I lead 'Stillwaters', which is an ecumenical, new monastic community in the city. It's a community of contemplative prayer. And our principle prayer is this, our principle prayer is that where we patiently allow God to pray in us and it's this prayer of the psalmist 'Be still and know that I am God'. We often pray like this. 'Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am. Be still a know. Be still. Be.

Presence. It's really hard to be patiently waiting on God, knowing that we have nothing but we have everything because he has God. Can I encourage you to support Tom and your Emma and your leadership in waiting on God? Encourage them not to take matters into their own hands. It's okay, we're happy to wait with you. Encourage them to do nothing that detracts from being in Christ, the rock, living water. Can I encourage you to resist the murmuring? You have good channels for communication. Yes, we all have concerns. Use the the channels we have to share our concerns with the wardens or with Tom. Send them an email, pick up the phone, take him for a coffee. But resist the murmuring, resist joining in the murmuring and wait with your leadership in prayer. And the promised land? The promised land is the subject of this series you're in. Well, the Promised Land is not in the future. It's now because we are in Christ. Amen.