

“A dry and weary Land”

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28 Feb 2016

When I read the Psalm set down for today (Ps 63, part of which we read as our call to worship) I was struck by the lines of verse 2

“My soul thirsts for you as in a dry and weary land, where there is no water”

As we learnt a couple of weeks ago when think of Jesus in the desert, you can survive without food for quite a long time provided you have shelter – but you can only last about two days without water

A dry and weary land, and much of Israel is desert and surrounded by a dry and weary land. Living in that kind of environment was part of Jewish history – their forebears had wandered for forty years in the transition from Egypt to Canaan, a land the bible tells us was a land flowing with milk and honey

And the Hebrews learned to live in that harsh environment.

But time and time again as they traversed that dry and weary land they longed for the lush valleys and green fields of Egypt where along the Nile there was always plenty of water. They longed for water - cool water, clear water, water. (You may remember that old song by the Sons of the Pioneers – All day we faced the barren wastes . . . etc)

Well that’s how the Hebrews felt. Ah the good old days back ther where there was plenty of water. In fact there were times when it seemed to them that even the slavery was better than being in this dry and weary place. And as part of the Jewish lived experience it became a powerful metaphor not only for emotional and spiritual desert experiences.

David, in writing his many psalms, is one who often makes use of it. And it’s a metaphor that still speaks. Having lived always in a land where water is plentiful we still know what it is to inhabit times and seasons when we seem forever trapped in a dry and weary place.

Times of hardship and sorrow, of long-suffering and illness, the loss of a loved one through death or divorce, It’s a metaphor which resonates

And into those times and places God speaks a comforting word through the prophet Isaiah:

“Come to the waters! Incline your ear to me. listen that you might live!”

And in fact the Hebrews found beauty in the desert when there was water. Wild flowers, beautiful sunsets, majestic escarpments, green oases. There the Desert Fathers and Mothers went from Constantine’s Rome to escape from the ways of the world and find wisdom in solitude as did John the Baptist, the Essenes, Jesus and Paul before them.

But Paul in writing to the Christians in Corinth, uses the Hebrews desert experiences for a different purpose. He uses them as a warning against complacency and over-confidence – the feeling that we can deal with life in our own strength . . . and most often we can!

But says Paul “Watch out that you do not fall!” and uses events in the desert to reinforce his point. The constant temptation to go your own way instead of seeking God’s. Again and again the prophets thunder “God says you are a stiff-necked people!” A wayward and stubborn people

(explain that in ancient ploughing, an ox which would not respond to the farmer’s directing goad was called stiff-necked)

Only twice in the Gospels is it recorded that Jesus wept. Once was as he approached the burial place of his dear friend Lazarus, and the other was when he entered Jerusalem for the last time on that Palm Sunday to the shouts of the adoring crowd. When he saw the city he wept.” If only you had recognised what makes for peace”. He expressed the same thought early in Luke’s account just a few verse further on from today’s reading.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Luke 13:34)

Actually I believe that is the sentiment behind today's Gospel reading. The strange response Jesus made to the Jews who told him about Pilate mingling Galilean's blood with their sacrifices, and the seemingly unrelated story of the barren fig tree.

What lies behind this story is the continuing antipathy and hatred of the Jews for the Romans, focused in the figure of Pilate. He was building a much needed aqueduct into Jerusalem and decided to take the sacred treasure of the temple to fund it. As you can imagine there was a riot, but Pilate was prepared. It happened that his palace was close to the temple and when the riot occurred Pilate sent many of his soldiers dressed as Jews into the crowd, and at a signal from him they began to lay about them with their hidden clubs. Many were injured and some killed. Now often the very poor would kill and dress their own sacrificial animals just outside the temple to avoid the cost of having the priests do it for them. And it was some poor Galileans who were killed in the riot as they were engaged in this task that led to their own blood being mingled with that of their sacrifice.

For some time the belief had been growing among the Jewish populace that Jesus was the expected Messiah who would raise the armies of God and wipe the hated Romans from the face of their land. There was also the widely held belief even common today that to suffer such a tragedy these Galileans must have seriously offended God.

(recount the comment of someone regarding the Christchurch earthquake)

Now there was an unspoken challenge to Jesus from those that confronted him with the account of Pilate's behaviour – If you are the Messiah, what are you going to do about it? And in response Jesus obliquely challenges their understanding of God. They like many others assumed that God was a God of vengeance, and if something bad happened then the person suffering must have done something wrong.

“No” said Jesus “The Galileans were no worse sinners than anyone else. Neither were those killed when the tower of Siloam fell. They were no

worse than anyone else living in Jerusalem”

In this world bad stuff just happens.

But if you don't listen;

if you don't repent and change your attitude;

if you don't learn that God is a God of compassion and mercy;

if you don't learn to love your enemies;

then nothing will change, and whether sinner or not you will perish in the same manner they did - because your enemies will rise and crush you, you and your children. And in all of Jerusalem they will not leave one stone upon another. (Luke 20:44)

So why did Jesus, at this point, tell the puzzling parable of the fig tree that hadn't yet born fruit. The fig tree often represents Israel so a popular interpretation is that Israel needed to respond to God's purposes.

But everyone who first heard that story would know that a fig tree doesn't bear fruit until its fourth year!

This is not a story of barrenness but of the owner's lack of understanding and impatience.

To attack Pilate is neither God's way nor is it God's time.

As God through Isaiah said “Incline your ear to me, listen that you might live.”

So whatever the circumstance and whatever life's season,
wait for the Lord,

listen to the Lord,

trust that no matter what the circumstances,
the Lord is with you.

Readings:

Isaiah 55: 1-9

1 Corinthians 10: 11-13

Luke 13: 1-9