

In the name of God who creates, renews and sustains.....

Readings Exodus 17: 1-7 & John 4:5-42

When, some years ago, in the middle of drought, I was asked to lead a 'sending out service' for a couple who had lived and worked in Sydney for many years, as they were heading from Sydney to take up ministry in the Hay area in western NSW, I was asked to focus on the lectionary passages for that week. They were the passages read today.

Robin Mann, a Lutheran, whose songs we often sing from Together in Song, and more frequently from the All Together series in the 9am service, has written many songs that touch me on life's journey.

From the book '*All Together Whatever*', there are two songs appropriate for this week's lectionary.

'Is the Lord with us or not?' begins with the image of those desert wanderers, which Howard read in Exodus

The Chorus:

*Why are we here? Where are we going?
Don't like the scenery, don't like the plot.
Is the Lord with us, is the lord with us is the Lord with us or not.*

They were moving through the desert,
they were hungry and sore,
and they started asking loudly, What for? (verse 1)

Two chapters earlier in the Exodus story, the Hebrew people were dancing about, singing Miriam's song of victory, boasting of god Yahweh's victory over god Pharaoh, and probably eating and drinking too much of the provisions they had. But they were out of Egypt.

By Exodus 17, water, or rather the lack of it, continues a chain of afflictions and the mood of the people turns sour as the water at Marah.

Can you imagine, forty generations after they last heard anything, they have to be introduced by Moses to god Yahweh.

A promise of freedom from the slavery imposed by Pharaoh is given, along with a promise of their own land. But now it seems to them, this god Yahweh is going to neglect them – first bad water, then no food, now no water and a trackless waste of desert looms before them.

What have they gotten themselves in...?

The good old-time religion of god Pharaoh included them being treated as slaves, but at least they had food and water.

Walter Brueggemann, American, Old Testament scholar and theologian put a positive twist. *'Yes, the work was hard, but it built character. You could see what you had done at the end of the day. You were part of something big and the cities and monuments you built would stand for generations.'*

This god Yahweh, expects them to follow blindly day to day a pillar of smoke that seems blown by the wind and to trust in a great plenty that they are unable to grasp,

Often, we too, get lost in our relationships when our imaginations come between us and another person.

The rock/mountain of Horeb appears in so many different places in the Genesis story, that one of the traditions in rabbinic literature is that Horeb actually moved with the Hebrew people like the pillar of smoke and fire r what kind of rock formations in the Sinai Peninsula might contain water that would be released if the rock were broken open. Have you tried to break any kind of rock with a stick?

But then this is not a story about hydrology, mineralogy or geography. It's a story about trust and building of relationship between the Hebrews and Moses, between Moses and God, between the Hebrews and God.

Moses' ratings in the latest most popular leader polls are so bad he feels his life is threatened.

Any other leader might have worked out the quickest way bac to the seventy-palm oasis in Chapter 15.

Any other leader would have taken the members of the press and leaders of the opposition further into the wilderness to watch him hit a rock with the stick. But Moses' experience with Yahweh, had built a relationship of trust.

And what is this Yahweh like who is being revealed.

The God of all creation and all the surprises creation holds, would choose the unlikely combination of rock and water?

In the desert, we might seek a rock for shelter in a sandstorm or, from the heat. We might not expect any rock to provide them with water.

A relationship with this God will be filled with surprises; pleasant surprises, life giving surprises that can break open barren situations to give refreshment and hope for the future.

In the Hebrew scriptures, complaining about Yahweh is an honoured tradition. Job famously challenges God. Prophets try to resist the divine plan when God calls them to service. In today's passage from Exodus the whole group raises its voices against God's management of this precarious trip.

This God of the rock that becomes a spring calls the Hebrews into relationship.

We modern Christians reluctantly aim harsh words at God or question divine arrangements. In the Old Testament, an argument with God suggests a real relationship. Anger assumes connection, emotional connection.

Mind you, there are times when I have been called or asked to take on something that seemed to be impossible.

My response has been, 'I'll have to have an argument with God about that.' Some people have looked shocked as if in disbelief that I would argue with God.

I usually end up doing what ; I'm asked

Surprises can frighten us, frustrate us, or amuse us.

But they always call us to change.

We may respond by defending ourselves against surprises or by embracing the change.

When have you complained to God about a situation, only to discover that through God's guidance, there is a clear rational response/solution?

Why are we here? Where are we going?

Don't like the scenery, don't like the plot.

Is the Lord with us, is the lord with us is the Lord with us or not.

I mentioned earlier the second song which sits well 'Wellsprings' is by Don Stewart of Victoria.

The chorus -

*Like the woman of old,
each day we go to the wellsprings of life,
to find Jesus there.*

Read the verses

Some days the well seems dry.
We can't reach the water- it's too hard.
Some days our legs won't take us,
our hearts are aching, crying.

Some days our minds are reeling.
There's too much happening –
we need to stop.
Some days our souls are parched.
We need the water – so thirsty.

Some days there's no escape
life's routine and madness.
Some days we don't want to go –
we can't see the rhyme or reason.

Some days we're resurrected,
we feel new life – inside us.
Some days our faith moves mountains,
we feel life's glory – earth and heaven.

What would it be like – a chance encounter with Jesus at, as you catch some water at a water fountain, or vending machine.

Would that conversation be full of misunderstanding, or would it be a transforming moment?

The story of the woman at the well gives us a rare moment of dialogue between a real person of the ancient world and a world-changing personality.

This unnamed woman is courteous. We might also call her feisty.

Like many conversations, we have with another person, the woman doesn't understand what Jesus means.

He talks of offering her living water and she immediately thinks he means H₂O with an additive, something that will take away the boring task of water-fetching, as well as her thirst, like a conjuring trick,

We can't blame the woman. She is coping with an intimidating scene, a face to face moment with the Creator of the universe.

The disciples and others reacted this way all the time, misinterpreting Jesus, crudely reducing what he said to impossible earthly components.

Even the learned Nicodemus as we heard last week asked, "Born again?" "How can a person enter the womb a second time?"

But the Samaritan woman hangs in there. The conversation continues. She concentrates on Jesus and what he is saying. Her attention sharpens. She listens harder. She is riveted by this stranger's insight into her life.

In the end she is busting to tell others about his effect in her.

Spiritual conditions are no different now. Two thousand years later wrestling with and understanding faith is about the same.

When Jesus speaks of living water in this well-known story his words suggest a spring of water rising from a calm source.

I think of water rushing down from a mountain top- the beckoning sound, pure, unstoppable.

On a calm day, I think of the water jet in Lake Burley Griffin - shooting into the air.

This is faith, Jesus seems to be saying. This living water is what I offer. Why not reach out to it? It's life-giving. Why settle for less? It's simple. Why complicate it?

But of course, we do complicate it. We want to know who else is drinking from it. What are its origins? No thanks. I have my own water supply already.

With the woman at the well, Jesus could have talked about faith many ways. He could have gone on about the old debate between the Jews and Samaritans, but he moved beyond that.

Living water: it intrigued her. It stirred her own images of liberation from burdening daily uncertainties.

Every day we bring our images of thirst and refreshment to the news of living water. No definition can exhaust it's meaning.

Living Water is the theme of the National Adult Fellowship Committee for this three years.

The project of Adult Fellowships in this Synod – is raising funds for bottled water to support volunteers on Frontier Service projects. Participants in the Outback Links teams.....

For Patrol ministers.....

Though I've spoken about this before, please speak to me if you are interested.....

*Like the woman of old,
each day we go to the wellsprings of life,
to find Jesus there.*

Pray

Bountiful God, keep us mindful of your living eater, so that we may drink deeply from it and share it with others.