

Pentecost 16A 2020

Exodus 16.2-15

Phil 1.21-30

Mt 20.1-16

The capacity of humans to remember is an amazing thing. We can remember people and events from decades ago, some of them as if they were yesterday. The way our brain does that is incredible. Almost as amazing is our human ability to forget.

There are two types of forgetting, I think. The first is when a memory just isn't there. Someone might say - do you remember when...? We know we should remember, we were there, we experienced whatever it was, but we have no memory of it. We are just blank. Maybe that's just old age.

The second kind of forgetting is when we choose not to remember. We can see an example of this type of forgetting in today's first reading from the book of the Exodus.

The Exodus story so far: in response to the pleadings of the people of Israel who were slaves in Egypt, God set them free and led them out of Egypt as refugees on their way to the land God had promised them.

They entered the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, still being led by God, but the going was tough. They had been in relatively fertile Egypt along the Nile Valley. Now they were in the desert. Even though they had been slaves and received very harsh treatment and couldn't wait to get out, they did have food and water in Egypt. Now they were free, but their supplies ran out and they were doing it tough and, they were complaining.

The first verse of today's reading says: 'the whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness'. The people of Israel actually preferred to be back in Egypt as slaves than to be free in the wilderness. They had chosen not to remember how bad things were in Egypt, and their desperate cries to God to help them get out of Egypt in the first place.

Although today's reading begins with the complaints of the Israelites, its focus actually is on God, and the faithfulness of God, and the way God provides and keeps his promises. So, in verse 4, God said he would rain bread from heaven for the people and there would be enough each day for the needs of that day. He also promised meat for the people in the evening, so they would have bread and meat each day, and that's what happened.

Verse 13 of today's reading says – "in the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground" - the bread promised by the Lord.

The people cried out to the Lord to free them from slavery in Egypt. The Lord heard their cry and brought them out of Egypt to freedom in the wilderness on their way to the promised land. It was the wilderness, so it was harsh country. The people forgot how bad it was being slaves in Egypt and started complaining and saying they were better off in Egypt. The Lord heard their cry and was faithful, providing them with all they needed for each day as they journeyed to the promised land led by God.

In some ways we too are on a journey. It's not so much for us that we have been rescued from slavery - we have been rescued from slavery to sin, but we like the people of Israel are on a journey. We have left a situation we are not going back, and we are on a journey towards we don't know where.

We are on a journey in two ways.

First of all we have left what the church used to be like back 50 or 60 years ago in Australia. When I was working for ABM in the early 2000's I came across to Adelaide to publicise the work ABM was supporting in Australia and overseas, and I went to one of the parishes in Adelaide to preach on a Sunday morning. The priest of the parish was ordained in the 1960's and he said to me that when he was first ordained people just came to church. People came to church no matter what you did. In fact, he said, you could do nothing, and they would come to church. Well, that's not the way things are now. There has been a huge shift in our society. That shift is not just affecting the church. Many community groups are finding that their average age is rising and finding volunteers is harder. But certainly, for the church it often feels like we are swimming against the current and it's hard to get traction.

It feels like we have left one place - the way the church used to be in Australia, but we haven't arrived at where we will be. We don't know what the future will hold for our parishes. It's very tempting to look back to what was so familiar, back there in the 60's and even the 70's, when there were lots of people coming to church, when most weddings and funerals happened in a church context, when there were Sunday schools and big youth groups.

The church had a place in the community back then, and as we move into an uncertain future, it's tempting to look back, to crave what was familiar and good.

But we have left that time, there is no point in looking back. We cannot go back, just as the people of Israel could not go back to Egypt.

The second way we are on a journey is COVID19. This journey started in March this year and we have experienced enormous change in just a few months. I don't think we will ever go back to the way things were prior to the pandemic. So much has changed. There have been positive changes, and for instance many of us have learned how to use Zoom or FaceTime or Skype or similar. People who were not very good with computers are now much more skilled and at ease with them. I think tools like Zoom are here to stay. Things like better hygiene are also good and are hopefully here to stay. Maybe the 'wash your hands' message that has been around forever has finally gotten through.

But there have been other changes that are not so welcome. The job losses, the huge government debt which will end up impacting us all, the change to our very relaxed lifestyle, the reduction in the choices we used to be able to make.

Right now, it feels like we are on a journey through COVID19. The world has changed, and we are caught up in that. Some parts of the world much more than South Australia, but still we are impacted, and we don't know when it will end or how things will be when the pandemic does end.

Two journeys; both connected because they both involve leaving one situation and not having a clear sense of the destination. Both are also connected by God. One of the great lessons of the Exodus was the faithfulness of God. God led the people and God provided for the people. Their part was to trust God, which was the most important thing, and then flowing on from that trust - follow God's leading and do what God said to do. Trust was the bottom line.

In this, it is not unreasonable to recognise that leaving something, leaving the familiar way the church and society used to be and leaving the familiar way our world used to be pre COVID19 involves some grief. There was much that was good of the church and society in the 50's and 60's. Much life and energy and optimism. To realise we are not going back to the way church was back then involves grief.

Leaving the familiar pre COVID19 world with its many choices and opportunities may well involve grief. Things have changed. We won't be going back. The world is a different place and has been changed for ever.

It's not wrong to acknowledge that loss as we ask the Lord to help us to trust for the future.

There is a lot of anxiety around about what will happen with COVID19 and what will be the future of the church generally. We can learn from the Exodus that God is trustworthy. God will provide what we need. God may not provide what we think we want and it is not clear ahead of time how God will provide what we need, but God will provide what we need. The manna and meat in the wilderness provided by God were not the way the people expected, but they did the job. God will provide for us, probably in surprising ways.

We can trust that God will lead us through COVID. We can trust that God will guide us the church into whatever our future is. We know it won't be a future like the past but something quite different.

We can know and be sure that God hasn't given up on the world or the Anglican church in the Diocese of Adelaide. God continues to lead us. We need to be very prayerful, seeking Gods leading. We need to be open to change, to try new things. We need to be looking for where God is already working and joining with God in that, all the time trusting in God's love, and in that trust will be joy and hopefulness despite the very real uncertainty.

It's not surprising that there is anxiety in the wider community over COVID19 and it's not surprising that there is anxiety in the church about the future of the church. Not surprising at all. That's what uncertainty brings. But anxiety is not from God. God doesn't wish us to live anxiously. God wants us to live in peace. God doesn't want us to live anxiously, because in that state we tend to make mistakes, we tend to veer away from God and God's way, and we don't see where God is leading us.

God is trustworthy and will lead us today and tomorrow and the next day and so on, just as faithfully as he led the people of Israel in the wilderness. God will lead us, so we follow God's lead. We can be sure that will mean continuing to share God's work in the community. Sharing the good news of God's love in Jesus and God's vision of the future called the Kingdom of God.

May the Lord enable us to trust and follow every day. May the Lord give us his peace. May the Lord enable us to continue to share God's mission and work, whatever that might mean. Amen.