23rd March 2014 Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 17: 1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11.
John 4: 5-45

These sermon notes were prepared before the sermon was delivered and so do not transcribe the actual sermon word for word

The first reading always makes me smile – and at the same time speaks volumes about the reality of Lent, and the reality of life……
It starts by giving us a context, a setting; "*From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded.*"

Perhaps we will all translate this context in different ways, but somehow it does have a universal application; our Lent journey, and our life journey, is a journey of *stages*, and in different ways we will all have our version of *the wilderness of Sin.*
So as we engage the first reading we might consider 'where are we at' on our Lent journey, and 'where are we at' on our life journey.

We read that "*the whole congregation of the Israelites… camped at Rephidim*"; so they have paused in their journey, and that is our opportunity today, to pause and consider where we are at.
Just to add some significance to the place they are in; when we read further we see that the Amalekites attacked the Israelites while encamped at Rephidim, but were defeated (Exodus 17:8-16). They were the "first of the nations" to make war against Israel (Numbers 24:20). So have we also reached a place where battles need to be fought; and do we find ourselves ready defeat the forces that attack us?

It might be that some have lost a sense of journeying through life, for in our modern world, there is a point at which 'age' changes our life orientation. One of the life giving things we can glean from the first reading is that life is a divine pilgrimage, lived in stages, but with a divine orientation.

The whole Exodus journey and the 'Israelites' complaining to Moses illuminates the reality of the risks in our moving forward, either inwardly or outwardly. In the midst of the wilderness, the Israelites experience fear and get cold feet. When times get tough and they are faced with challenges, they forget the Divine orientation of their life pilgrimage and the promise of life that brought them out of slavery. They forget the unseen resources hidden within the challenges they face, and they again look backward, longing for Egypt and captivity, abandoning God's promise and Moses' wisdom. They look at their situation in terms of scarcity rather than divine abundance. They see what they don't have and complain about life's unfairness.
Life and Lent are usually filled with the reality of the Exodus narrative……

The story invites us to recognise our thirst; a thirst, or desire, for continuing our pilgrimage toward promise…. At the point of giving up, we somehow still know that we thirst… The Easter mystery will bring us (as it did Jesus) to the same place… On good Friday we have the same cry echoed from the cross; I thirst!.

In the wilderness of Lent we become thirsty; a thirst for companionship, a thirst for acceptance, a thirst for immortality, a thirst for end to suffering, and a thirst for relationship with God.

Perhaps that 'thirst' we experience in the stages of life, is a thirst for the water of baptism; a thirst for that very first taste of a life orientation toward God and "in Christ".

In the narrative of the first reading, Moses has the hero's role, he represents the prophetic and the faithful, but even he is lost in the wilderness….

In following the story we learn an important life lesson; Moses does not ask for help, he does not pray that God will make it all right; rather he prays; "*What shall I do*"?

He is looking for orientation rather than rescue; and that invites us to do the same as we engage the pilgrimage of Lent and move through our life stages toward the eternal promise of Easter.

"*What shall I do*" is a question for each and for all of us, imagine what we might discover if we can ask this question from within the place of our wilderness and with a desire to satisfy life's thirst. Imagine if our AGM became a sharing of our answers, a collective reorientation toward Divine promise, and a movement away from life's complaining challenges.

The Divine response to Moses question is also enlightening; an obvious 'God answer' would be to give Moses and "*the whole congregation of the Israelites"* something to drink.

However the response is an encouragement to action; *"Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."*

The way forward is not in God's hands, but is given into our hands.

The Gospel gives us another water story, and it is important to appreciate that it comes from John's gospel. Matthew, Mark and Luke can be read very much as gospels that follow the narrative of Christ's life; John's gospel is much more abstract and seeks to illuminate deeper theological truths, it is not so much documenting the life of Jesus, as opening the reader to what Christ has revealed.

In today's Gospel the encounter at the well provides a setting for revelation; "*Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty."*

In Exodus, God tells Moses to strike the rock so that the water may flow.

In the gospel story we know that Jesus himself will be struck with blows and rods and ultimately with nails. But in complete integrity with the orientation of baptism, the living water of life will flow.

In the Easter narrative, we will hear how "*One of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance (λόγχη), and immediately there came out blood and water.*" [John 19:34] this action at the crucifixion is only found in John's gospel, it is as if John is following the thread from the well to the cross; and in so doing making real the words that were spoken by Jesus to the Samaritan woman.

Our thirst, in the wilderness, our thirst in the place of life's battles and our thirst when life is lifted to the cross is to quenched.
And it is quenched not by our complaining, nor by our turning back to the slavery of the past, but rather by contemplating one of the deepest questions we can address in prayer "*What shall I do*"?

And, then by our participating in the Divine direction, the orientation of our baptism.

In the OT narrative Moses renames the place where he is; he renames "Rephidim", the place of battle and he "*called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"*"

Had he not found a positive answer to that question, the place name would be unchanged…
And likewise, had not the water poured forth from the side of Christ on the cross, we would not have been baptised.

"You are water
I'm water
we're all water in different containers
that's why it's so easy to meet
someday we'll evaporate together."
— *Yoko Ono*