

New Vistas



Hello again! I would like to begin today's reflection by referring to something I touched on in my previous reflection (11.6.20). I said that many biblical stories are set in times of trauma and that they have much to teach us.

Many of us are familiar with the Old Testament story of the Israelites' flight from Egypt related in the book of Exodus, where they had been enslaved and oppressed for many years. During their escape, the Red Sea had miraculously parted to let them through - yes, we know that bit – but, where to next? We know that their destiny lay in the Promised Land, the land “flowing with milk and honey”, but what about the route that they took to get there? Where did God take them on that journey? And what was their response?

To briefly set the scene: The Israelites, under the (earthly) direction of Moses, find themselves in the Arabian desert, a vast tract of nothingness which stands between them and their destination. “What now?” the people ask. On the one hand they have escaped from a gruelling, oppressive lifestyle, but on the other hand their lives had structure, routine, and a measure of security: they were housed and fed. They now find themselves in unfamiliar, unpredictable territory, with no structure to their existence. They were promised ‘freedom’, but what does this new-found freedom look like? To make matters worse, there didn't appear to be A PLAN, only an objective. How did the Israelites respond? How would *you* respond?

We read that they moaned and complained to Moses and to God!

....” What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, ‘leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?’ It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” (Exodus 14: 11, 12)

How did Moses respond?

“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Lord will fight for you; you need only be still”.

I'm reminded of an incident right at the beginning of my Reader training. I attended an introductory Summer School and our inspirational tutor, on noting the ‘rabbit caught in the headlights’ look of terror on the faces of her new recruits at the prospect of what lay before us, stood up, spread her arms in an angel - like gesture and boomed “FEAR NOT!”. This powerful, edifying posture was a recurring sight in the years to come, and was used whenever we appeared to be, in show jumping parlance, ‘balking at the fence’,

It was hard to ‘fear not’ then, and unimaginably hard for all those rootless, fearful, hungry and

exhausted people wandering around in the unforgiving desert.

After a while, the recriminations began:

"If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There, we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death!"
(Ex 16: 3)

You feel for Moses, a person who was lacking in self-confidence anyway, but he listened and took their complaints to God, trusting in the outcome. God, hearing Moses' plea for help, provided 'manna from heaven' to feed the people.

Well, the Israelites had to wander around the desert for 40 years before God deemed them 'fit' enough to enter the Promised Land, and the rest of the book of Exodus is the story of how they were re-shaped and moulded through their trials and tribulations.

For me, their story resonates with our current situation. During their privations they were given space and time to reflect on the way things were, and the way things could be.

I'll return to something else I mentioned in my last reflection: what will be our legacy from this time of pandemic?

Rev Andy Bryant, in his article 'A Time for Courage, not Fear; Love not Anxiety' has some interesting thoughts. He maintains that the 'powers that be' have achieved a high level of public cooperation by playing the 'fear' card. The downside of this is "if you have encouraged everyone to be afraid, how do you encourage them to stop being afraid?". This has implications for when we return to any form of social interaction. He says, "It is harder to imagine a PM saying that out of love for one another, we need to socially distance.....'fear' says "I will self-isolate because you might be a risk to me". 'Love' says, "I will self-isolate as I do not want to be a risk to you". It is love not fear, we will need as we slowly emerge from lockdown. If the motivation is about protecting 'me and mine', then the virus will have done lasting damage to the fabric of society. If the motivation is about how we do this together for the benefit of all, then the virus can lead to strengthening bonds of community".

This suggests that we need an adjustment of the language we use in this context, and a realignment of our attitude from putting 'self' first to 'others' first.

The vista will have changed – is changing – at this point in our journey. I wonder how the Israelites greeted their new vista as they trudged wearily out of the desert? Their legacy from their 'desert' experience (the receiving of the 10 Commandments and a lasting covenant with God being just two!) laid down the foundations of our faith. Can we be instrumental in achieving a new vista more in line with God's Kingdom values for the next phase in our journey?

Shalom to you all

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