

SERMON – 1/3/26
'Testing and Quarrel'

Introduction:

Before we read this morning's Psalm, I want to set it in the context of an incident that is referred to in it and that is also referred to in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews.

In Exodus ch.17 the story is recounted of what happens after the people of God had been rescued from slavery in Egypt through the waters of the Sea which God had parted for them, and they were starting their journey through the wilderness towards the Promised Land. Food and water were obviously going to be an issue for such a large number of people in desert lands, but God provided water for them at Marah and at Elim and He provided manna and quail for them to eat. However, when they got to Rephidim in the desert they quarrelled with Moses saying that they had all been brought out of Egypt only to die of thirst and asking if God was really with them. Although they had rejoiced in God's salvation of them from Egypt they weren't so keen on the journey of faith that lay ahead of them. Moses came before God and asked what to do and he was told to stand with the elders at the rock of Horeb and strike the rock with his staff and water would gush forth. The people drank but Moses called the place Massah and Meribah which means testing and quarrelling.

It wouldn't be the end of the people's faithlessness – just a few pages on when Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Law the people made a golden calf to worship – and as a result a whole generation was sentenced to wander in the wilderness until their children had grown up and would inherit the Promised Land.

In Numbers ch.20 there is a very similar story which may be the same story retold or, since it fits in much later in the narrative, it may actually be the next generation exhibiting the same faithlessness. In that account it is Moses and his brother Aaron who are told that they won't lead the people into the Land since they seem to suggest to the people that it was *they* themselves (rather than God) who were causing the water to come from the rock.

The question it raises for us is whether when we worship we are just paying lip service to God or whether our faith is something we actually live out beyond the walls of the church.

I love you, Lord, and I lift my voice to worship you, O my soul, rejoice. Take joy, my King, in what you hear. May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.

Psalm 95:1-11

"Listen today to what [the Lord] says: 'Don't be stubborn, as your ancestors were at Meribah, as they were that day in the desert at Massah. There they put me to the test and tried me, although they had seen what I did for them'." (Psalm 95:8,9)

I'm sure I'm not alone in coming with joy to worship. It is good to praise the Lord and our hearts exult within us, our spirits rejoice as we lift our voices in songs old and new. We respond enthusiastically to the psalmist's calling to come before God with thanksgiving in our hearts and to put our faith into action, beginning with worship but expressing that worship in service as well as in song.

I want to begin this morning by taking you back nearly three and a half thousand years to the story of the Exodus of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. What cause for rejoicing there was – their imprisonment in Egypt was over; their enemy was conquered and they were on their way to the Promised Land. You would think that the people would be rejoicing at their salvation and coming before God with thanksgiving in their hearts. Although clearly they still had a difficult journey ahead of them, surely the experience of the Exodus must have reassured them that God was with them in power, and surely the prospect of a land flowing with milk and honey would spur them on. But no! The accounts given in the Books of Exodus and Numbers tell of the people gathering round Moses and Aaron to complain: "It would have been better if we had died, they say. Why have you brought us out into this wilderness? Just so that we can die with our animals? Why did you bring us out of Egypt into this miserable place where nothing will grow? There's no corn, no figs, no grapes, no pomegranates. There is not even any water

to drink!" (Num.20:2-5) Far from coming before the Lord with thanksgiving, they were coming to moan and grumble.

Now, for this morning's reading, we need to fast forward several hundred years. Here we find the people of Israel well-established in the Promised Land. The psalmist is calling the people to worship - "Come, let us praise the Lord! Let us sing for joy to God, who protects us... Let us bow down and worship Him; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker!" The psalmist reminds the people that there are so many reasons to praise God - the Lord is a mighty king over all the gods; He rules over the whole earth from deepest cave to highest hill, over sea and dry land. There is nowhere where His rule does not extend, except, it would seem, in the human heart. That is when the psalmist reminds his listeners of those events I've just mentioned - "Don't be stubborn as your ancestors were at Meribah." There they put the Lord to the test and tried Him, although they had seen what He had done for them. And now it seemed history was repeating itself. God's people were blind to the wonderful things that He had done for them and was continuing to do and they were slow to give Him the praise and honour that were rightfully due to His name.

It is sobering to realise that the result of the people's grumbling in the desert of Sinai was that they were condemned to wander in the wilderness for a whole generation before the Promised Land was opened up to their children. And sobering for us to recall that despite the psalmist's exhortations and the warnings of the prophets, history would repeat itself again when the Kingdom was removed from Israel and the people sent into exile in Babylon. And the message for us is that while it really doesn't take much for us to recognise that God is always worthy of praise, we seem to be rather quick as His flock to turn our back on Him and to wander our own way into trouble. That is just as true of us today as it was in the psalmist's day and in the time of the Exodus. Let me explore that with you for a few moments this morning.

First of all, let's think about how readily our thoughts turn to grumbling and moaning. Although we have enjoyed some beautiful spring days how quickly will we start complaining when there is a wet day or a cold wind? We grumble that our food is not just quite the way we would like it to be, completely ignoring

the fact that it comes very easily to us and that there are too many in our world who go hungry day after day and who have to labour hard for the meagre rations they do have. We moan about the things we don't like in our experience of church life while remaining blind to the many good things that God is doing among us and through us. If only we could see ourselves as others see us. We are in danger of being condemned to the kind of wilderness experience that the people of Israel suffered when they stubbornly refused to recognise the good things that God was giving them and refused to accept the promises that He was holding out to them.

Be honest, when did you last have a moan? It probably wasn't that long ago – it may even have been since you came in through the doors of the church this morning! "Listen to what the Lord says," writes the psalmist. "Don't be stubborn, as your ancestors were at Meribah, as they were that day in the desert at Massah. There they put me to the test and tried me, although they had seen what I did for them." (vv.8-9)

And there's the clue. It's in focussing on what the Lord has done for us that our hearts are turned from grumbling to gratitude. The rescued people of Israel in Sinai were allowing the immediate challenges of their circumstances to blind them and were failing to notice that the Lord Almighty was with them – yes, they were in the wilderness, but they had been freed from their enemies; no, there was nowhere for them to grow crops but did the Lord not provide for them, manna from heaven to eat and water from the rock to drink? Or again, generations later, God's people, settled as they were in the Promised Land, needed to be reminded that the Lord was their Creator and the King of all the earth, sovereign over the deepest caves and the highest hills and over land and sea. And similarly do we need to lift our eyes above those things that prompt us to grumble.

There is a spiritual discipline that I would heartily recommend to you and that any one of us could practise. Each day this week take a moment to name three things for which you are thankful. In other words, stop and count your blessings. I often have the privilege to spend time with people at times of great hardship and sorrow and it humbles me as someone who I think has had things

pretty easy in life in terms of health and prosperity to hear those people who are facing the most epic challenges in life recognising that there are others dealing with still greater struggles than theirs, and giving thanks for the care they are receiving in their time of trial - the visitor who calls to encourage them, the food that is provided for them in hospital, the knowledge that others are praying for them. And if there are reasons to be thankful even at the material and physical level, how much more so at the spiritual level.

My friends, we all face difficulties and disappointments and sometimes we can't see the way forward through the wilderness. We wonder why God has brought us to the place we have reached. But are we not people of faith? Has not God been faithful to us thus far? In fact has God not blessed us in ways that are too many to describe? He has promised never to leave us or forsake us but to lead us through the darkest valley and welcome us as honoured guests in His home for ever. Trust Him, my friends, and let's come before Him with thanksgiving even for those blessings we are yet to receive

Surely you and I have far more reasons to be grateful today than we do to grumble. In the words of the old Gospel song: 'Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.'

The psalmist exhorts us: "Come, let us bow down and worship Him; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker! He is our God; we are the people He cares for, the flock for which He provides." How lavishly God has provided for us – how much more do all of us have than we really need – and how wonderfully has He blessed us through the Gospel of Christ. As we celebrate again today the fact that Jesus Christ gave Himself for us, we are called to give ourselves to Him completely, heart and soul and mind and strength to advance the work of the Kingdom in our day. Don't let's be stubborn and grumble like the people of Israel did at Meribah. Rather, come with thanksgiving and worship God not only with songs of joy but with acts of service and walk faithfully and in faith in the way of Jesus in the world for the honour of His name.