

High St Uniting Church Frankston

Persistence of Revelation

Exodus 17:1 - 7



Looking at the state of the world and all that's wrong, and the stress that the church is under, I have often wondered, 'Why doesn't God just pull apart the clouds and say, "Look, I'm real, believe in me and do the right thing".' But, of course, there are plenty of stories in scripture where God did that, or similar, and the people were filled with awe and wonder, and a couple

of weeks later, or days later, or even minutes later, they acted as if nothing had happened. It's as if the human capacity to remember amazing events is drastically lessened by the forces of reality around us. The people of God, the Israelites released from slavery in Egypt, had seen the wonders that God performed to get them released. They had seen the amazing sight of the waters recede to let them cross and come back to swamp the Egyptians, they had seen the manna fall from heaven each day, and twice as much on Friday, and yet less than a week later they are behaving like spoilt children on a trip. "Are we there yet? I want to go back home. I'm thirsty. Why are we here?" Is faith really that tenuous?

A popular saying is, 'History is written by the victors.' And I wonder if people who say that have read the Bible. All the stories of the Israelites in the desert, the people under the kings, and even the disciples following Jesus, don't seem to be filled with heroes and victors, and they aren't all successful people looking back at the mistakes of their ancestors. The Israelites in the time of the Judges couldn't claim to be better than the wanderers in the desert. Rather these stories look like character lessons for the readers. Examples of what not to do, and yet at the same time, examples of what God can do, even with faulty people. The myth of social evolution would have us believe that we are better people – more intelligent, more civilised – than people in the distant past. Really? Are our current corporate overlords any different to the Egyptian taskmasters who forced the Israelites to forage for stubble to make bricks? We are humans now just as much as the people of ancient stories. And, just like our ancestors, our capacity to remember amazing events is drastically lessened by the forces of reality around us. We can have the most amazing, Spirit filled worship on Sunday, but will our faith hold out in the face of events, stresses and worries of Monday, and Tuesday, and Wednesday, and Thursday? Do we have the faith to trust in the presence and care of the God who has been revealed to us in Jesus, and not give in to the sort of complaining and testing of God that Moses had to deal with?

The two texts in this week's Lectionary seem to be connected by a theme of water – Moses striking the rock and the Samaritan woman at the well who is promised streams of living water – however there is also a deeper connection. The very nature of God and what is called for in our worship and our living – God is a Spirit, and we are to worship in spirit and in truth. Thirst is a powerful reality to fight against, but the Israelites had let physical reality swamp their spirit, their faith in this God of amazing signs. Not for the first time, and this is not the end of the story. Water from the rock struck by Moses staff - the same staff that struck the Nile, the same staff that stretched over the sea – doesn't cure the Israelites from grumbling,

from asking again and again the same question, “Is the LORD among us or not?” They needed a spiritual faith that could look beyond the physical and find enduring assurance. The Samaritan woman’s comments to Jesus about worshipping on the mountain, as she had been taught, reflect the issues around faith and worship in Jesus’ time for both Samaritans and Jews; the physical factors that divided them. Ancestors, lineage, location of the place of worship, laws, and culture. She needed a spiritual faith that could look beyond the physical and find on-going assurance.
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Faith that is based in God, the Spirit, is not reliant on the physical. The wonderful, spiritual worship experiences you have on Sunday are not because you are here, in this building. True worship comes because your spirit is connected to God. And so it is that connection that becomes important, and strengthening that connection means all the physical, external things need not swamp your faith. Wednesday doesn’t have to wipe out Sunday.

I used to feel a bit empty in faith, and thought, “If I could just get out of the city into a beautiful part of God’s creation, I can connect to God.” Or “If I could just spend time on my knees in the church, I can connect to God.” And while some people do get a spiritual lift in creation, and others appreciate those ‘thin places’, the spiritual reality for me was the need to connect to God in my spirit and not via some the physical requirement or location.

When Jesus went into the wilderness, or up a hill, to pray quietly, it wasn’t because he was looking for the physical location to enhance his connection with God but because he was quietening the physical distractions to enable a better connection of spirit to God. Persistence of faith in the face of the physical realities of work, family, culture, relationships, and responsibilities, requires the reminders that God is a Spirit and there is a reality beyond what our senses tell us. Work on the connection of your spirit to God. The snatched moments of prayer or remembering, the intentional time of quiet and devotion, or the setting and holding of the mind through hymns or remembered scripture. Work on what is necessary for you to strengthen your spiritual connection to allow your faith to survive.

Our task as disciples to flow out into the world in love, compassion, justice, and service is supported by worshipping and connecting with God the Spirit. God loves the world and connecting to God builds our love for the world. And, more importantly, our living in the world of stresses, troubles, distractions, and disappointments is reliant on holding onto faith and trust through living with God in Spirit and in truth.