

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XVI
THE BITTER AND THE SWEET
(Exodus 15:22-27)

A week ago we left the children of Israel singing with greatest gusto the praise of almighty God after the deliverance at the Red Sea.

Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

A profound hymn of thanksgiving for a profound salvation by the mighty hand of God.

A short three days later they are encamped by the bitter waters of Marah, murmuring against Moses, “What shall we drink?” Gören Larsson observes, “The song of the people ceases only to become a murmuring complaint.”¹ Surely the people was short on memory and long on criticism. How could they forget, and so soon after so great a deliverance? The song had hardly died on their lips ‘ere they became long in the mouth.

But let us not judge them too quickly. Consider first that they had lived long lives in bondage and misery, waiting, writhing, wailing—and only recently had they learned that God had heard their cries, seen their suffering, and had come to their aid. They would need longer than a few weeks or months to learn of God and to trust his ways. Indeed, 40 years would hardly suffice. Learning to believe, to trust, to walk with God, is a life-long affair—for all of us. Next, we need to have some realism about the severity of the test. Yes, it was only three days, but have you ever marched for three days without water? for three long, hot days in the late spring or early summer? for three days in the parched desert of the Sinai Peninsula? and, then after looking hour after hour after hour for some spring or oasis, finally to come upon water only to find it so salty or bitter as to be unpalatable? You can go without food for weeks on end, but not water. When you are that stressed out physically and emotionally, it doesn’t take much to dampen the ‘can-do’ spirit and put you in a critical mood.

¹ *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, p. 113.

The people were once again on the edge of desperation and so turned once again on their so called deliverer. The text leading up to this incident says, “Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went into the Wilderness of Shur” (15:22), and some have surmised from this that this was Moses’ doing and not God’s, that he was ad-libbing as it were, doing his own thing and that that is why they were in this mess (Cassuto), but that contradicts the repeated lessons of the Exodus and wilderness wandering, that God in his providence does lead us in such a way as to teach us to constantly rely on him alone. “Give us this day our *daily* bread.” It was God who called Moses and equipped him for this task. He instructed him at every step of the way. We learn here that whatever the immediate causes that affect our lives, whether they be persons or events or circumstances, all is ultimately from the hand of God, is intended for us by his love, and will serve his final purpose which is always for our ultimate good. Only in this light can we say with St. Paul, “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). All things, even this situation that seemed so desperate.

The people murmured against Moses, but Moses cried unto the Lord. Moses understood that “Our help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.” And “the Lord showed him a tree, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet” (15:25). Now this may seem like a magician’s trick or a dazzling display of the supernatural, but we note, first, that there are in fact bitter lakes in the area, some that are called that and this one that was called Marah, second, that, as we indicated, the water is undrinkable because of a high sodium content, and, third, that there are trees in this region, the acacia for one, with the property of soaking up the saltiness so as to make the bitter water potable. It is suggested that Moses learned this trick from his nomadic father-in-law while in exile. The text, however, is explicit: “*The Lord showed him a tree, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.*”

We should note that this incident, following immediately after the event of the Exodus is not to be understood as merely a journal entry of difficulties along the way. It was a major teaching event for the people, and therefore we need to read it very carefully. In that it is clearly stated that it was the Lord who *showed* Moses the tree, the point is emphasized that the people, God’s children, Israel his first-born, needed from the

moment of their birth as a nation the guidance and instruction of God. As Rabbi Cassuto put it, “It was desirable that immediately after their liberation the children of Israel should learn the great truth that they need instruction and guidance from heaven.” He goes on to say, “The realization of the need for *instruction* from the Lord prepares the people spiritually for the acceptance of the yoke of the *Torah* and precepts.”² He is making the point we would otherwise miss, namely, that this rather unexpected word ‘showed’ (“The Lord *showed* Moses) is the verb from which comes the noun, ‘Torah’, a word that refers to the teaching of Moses (to the teaching of God through Moses), and is indeed the usual word for the whole of the Pentateuch. Without that instruction in the way of the Lord the people would never know the way of the Lord.

We have stressed repeatedly that Holy Scripture must be read whole. This means that the Old Testament must be read in the light of the New and vice versa, but it also means more narrowly that each text must be read in the light of its larger context. With regard to the Book of Exodus, it means that the first half must be read in the light of the last half, and vice versa. When we do that we will see that the event of God’s great redemption includes not only the deliverance of a people from Egypt, but their preparation to receive the great revelation of God at Mt. Sinai. The deliverance and the revelation are two parts of God’s one redemption. As Martin Buber put it succinctly, “Revelation through the deed . . . precedes revelation through the word.”³ The Deed is the acted Word; the Word is the conceptualized Deed. Thus God’s deliverance of his people in such a way as to underscore their impotence and need, their absolute dependence on him, and his all-sufficient and sovereign grace was their mental, emotional and ‘existential,’ if you will, preparation to understand and grasp the teaching, “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other God but me.” It was their deliverance that prepared them to understand that. Indeed, this is precisely why the giving of the 10 Commandments in Exodus 20 begins with the reminder, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (20:2).

We just said that the Old Testament must be read in the light of the New and vice versa. Many times the New Testament will make explicit its explication or elaboration of

² U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 184.

³ *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, p. 79.

the Old. Where there is no particular warrant, however, we may be seeing in the Old Testament what is not there, what is called eisegesis rather than exegesis, reading into rather than reading out of. Sometimes this is done quite sincerely and with pious imagination, as when some ancient fathers saw in the Song of Miriam, which follows the Song of Moses and immediately precedes today's text, a picture of the cross of our Lord, because the Song was accompanied by tambourines or drums, which are made of skin stretched over wood. A pious thought, but a far reach. Even Freud said that sometimes an object is only itself, and not a symbol for something else. With regard to the wood thrown into the water to make the bitter sweet, we are dealing with a more significant event, one that provides more suitable grounds for devotional thought. St. Ambrose said regarding baptism,

Marah was a fountain of most bitter water. Moses cast wood into it and it became sweet. For water without the preaching of the cross of the Lord is of no avail for future salvation. But after it has been consecrated by the mystery of the saving cross, it is made suitable for the use of the spiritual laver and of the cup of salvation. As then Moses, that is, the prophet, cast wood into that fountain, so too the priest utters, over this font, the proclamation of the Lord's cross, and the water is made sweet for the purpose of grace.⁴

It is the cross of Christ that makes the bitter waters upon which we come often enough in life sweet. He in his suffering identifies with us in ours. If, like Moses, we cry unto the Lord rather than murmuring with the people, the Lord will answer and will make a way through. The cup of suffering from which Jesus' soul drew back, becomes for us the cup of salvation, sweetness for the bitter. It is with his stripes we are healed.

Let me say before we move on, though I have seen no reference to it, that it is hard for me not to think of this first miracle in the desert at Marah, the turning of bitter waters into sweet, as being parallel in some way to Jesus' first miracle at Cana of Galilee, turning water into wine. You might reflect on that.

Lastly in this regard, some have noted that this first trial in the desert in some sense parallels the first plague on the Egyptians, which turned the water of the Nile into blood so that they could not drink it. I'm not sure what to make of that hint of a parallel

⁴ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; Old Testament III, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, pp. 83-84.

with the plagues and would not mention it except that immediately after this incident there is this carefully presented lesson:

There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he proved them, saying, “If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, *I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians*; for I am the Lord, your healer (15:25-26).

Surely this underscored the meaning of this test, this proving, and leads us on toward the giving of the Commandments: “Hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes.” And this is the lesson for us as well.

The chapter closes with a very different scene briefly described: “Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there by the water” (15:27). This was a true oasis in the desert, Surely Rabbi Cassuto is right here to remind us of Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd. . . . He leads me beside waters of rest.”⁵ Twelve springs and seventy palm trees. The numbers are suggestive—for the Jews, of the twelve tribes of Israel and the seventy clans—for the Christian, of the twelve apostles, who are surely fountains for us, and of the seventy disciples sent forth by our Lord to provide shade and sustenance for the world. Whatever else may be suggested here, after the testing at Marah, the Lord leads his people to an oasis of refreshment and shade, and abundance beyond measure. He always does.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity, November 15, 2009. Copyright © 2009.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 185.