**Exodus 17:1-7** “Is God with us or not?”

Not so long ago, I was leaning on the railing on the boardwalk, watching the stingrays and chatting with someone who was doing the same thing. She found out I was local, and soon the inevitable question came up: “And what do you do?” “I’m the Anglican priest in this area,” I replied. After the obligatory stunned silence, the next comment was, “I used to go to church once.”

“Oh?” I responded kindly, “And not any more?”

“Nah.”

“So why is that?”

And then the story came out – a story of tragedy in the family, and anger & disappointment in God because he let it happen. It was not an unfamiliar tale. Perhaps you have heard such stories as well.

Trust in God can be a fragile thing. It is dependent on how well we know him. For many people, their trust in God is very much tied to their circumstances. When things are working out, or when they perceive that prayers are answered, they’re happy with God. They find it easy to believe in him and trust him. But when things go wrong, because they feel that God is responsible for their circumstances, their concept of God is undermined and they begin to see him as vindictive, or at the very least capricious and unreliable, and they want nothing more to do with him.

In our story from Exodus chapter 17 this morning, we follow the Israelites as they begin to get to know their God, and learn to trust him.

The story finds the Israelites early in their journey in the wilderness. Their escape from Egypt and crossing of the Red Sea was still fresh in their memory. However, their trust in God was in its infancy. Though they had seen God do some incredible things, they still had a way to go before they knew God well enough for their trust in him to be secure.

In Exodus chapters 15 – 18, we find three trials or tests that God led the Israelites through, which helped their trust in him begin to grow.

The first trial was their desperate need to find water (15:22-27). They’d travelled in the desert for 3 days from the Red Sea, without finding any water, and no doubt their supplies were running perilously low. They finally found a spring only to discover the water was bitter totally undrinkable. They complained loudly to Moses, who took their dilemma to God. You’ll remember God told Moses to throw a piece of wood in the water, and it suddenly became sweet and drinkable. God listened to Moses prayer and rescued them.

The Israelites’ second trial was their need for food. The desert had not provided them with much to eat. They’d been travelling for weeks by now and they were very hungry. Once again, they complained bitterly to Moses, this time harking back to their days as slaves in Egypt, because at least there they’d had enough to eat! Once again, God heard their cries, and despite their obvious lack of trust, he sent them quails and manna to eat.

Then there was a third trial, from our reading this morning. The Israelites had reached the point where they were once again without water in the desert. They demanded that Moses provide it for them. Even though Moses chided them about putting God to the test, they became so aggressive in their complaints that Moses actually feared for his life! He cried out to God – “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

We read in v5: The LORD answered Moses, "Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.”

These three trials – and the many like it which were to follow – taught the Israelites two important things about their God.

1. That their God was a God who could be trusted; that he had the power to work wonders and perform miracles, even in the most impossible of circumstances. There were so many instances: the pillar of fire and pillar of cloud, the consumption of the sacrifice before the prophets of Baal, Ezekiel’s chariot of fire, Daniel in the Lion’s den, David & Goliath – you know all the stories!
2. That God was faithful and his promises could be believed. Israel learned that God delivers. There wasn’t a blueprint as to how God would work in a given situation, but they learned that God was faithful and did what he said he would do. When they walked with God, he blessed them, and time and again God routed the armies that threatened them. Remember the story of Gideon? God brought them victory that night with only 300 men against a vast army.

Throughout the Israelites’ wanderings in the wilderness, there was a pattern repeated itself time and again – there was an acute need, the Israelites cried out to God, often with repentance, and God delivered them.

Unfortunately, though, they were a ‘rebellious and stiff-necked people’, and it ultimately took an intervention from God, in the person of his Son, before his people were able to truly learn and respond to him.

In Ezekiel 36: 26-27, we have a prophecy which finds its final fulfilment in Christ. Through Ezekiel, God said: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

With the coming of the Holy Spirit, we can know God at a deeply personal and intimate level, and we are not reliant on just seeing him at work in our circumstances.

So as Christians, with the Holy Spirit living within us, is there anything in these stories which speaks to us?

There are a couple of things which I find particularly encouraging:

**First of all – I’m encouraged by God’s amazing patience with his people.**

I look at the Israelites’ stumbling attempts to relate to God. I note that they complain and grumble and whinge; I note that they so easily forget what God has done; and yet - God is still there for them! He still loves them; he still meets their needs. He doesn’t abandon them because they are still learning to trust him. He doesn’t condemn them because they doubt him.

Remember Thomas after the resurrection? Jesus didn’t condemn him because he couldn’t believe – he ministered to Thomas and provided what he needed; in Thomas’s case, it was to be able to place his fingers in the wounds left by the crucifixion. ‘Doubting’ Thomas, as he became known, went on to become a powerhouse for the kingdom of God, and was ultimately so committed to his Lord that he was martyred for his faith.

God does not discard us when we doubt, or when we question him, or when we get the wobbles. I find that greatly comforting.

**Secondly – These stories help me realise I may be in for a rough ride.**

Trust in God does not often arrive within us fully formed. In the same way gold is formed through being purified by fire, so our faith is refined through the difficult circumstances and trials which we experience. We read in 1 Peter 1:7 “These (trials) have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

If we are going to grow in our faith, if our trust is to be strengthened, if we are to become more like Christ, we will find ourselves thrown into circumstances which will challenge us and test us. Guaranteed.

If I were to plot my Christian experience on a graph, it would resemble a series of waves, with peaks and troughs. In the peaks, it’s been easy to serve God. But the troughs have been another thing altogether. I can think of at least two different periods in my Christian walk when I’ve come perilously close to throwing it all in (at least that’s what I thought at the time – God no doubt saw it differently) One was when Jay and I were running a business, often putting in 12-14 hour days, at the same time as raising four children, one of whom was extremely challenging, and another very needy. I lost momentum and just didn’t have time for God. I thought he was a very long way off. But he wasn’t.

And then there was a time when I found myself in a spiritual black hole – which I’ve told you about. That was probably the worst. And yet, God was there – even in that really dark time. I may not have been aware of his presence, but he never let go, and in time I surfaced. And you know something? When I surfaced – I found I’d been refined! Sometimes I think I’d have preferred to remain UN refined, as it was so awful, but I trust that God knows what he’s about.

As I said at the beginning, our trust in God can be a fragile thing. I think it helps to remember that spiritual growth, just like physical growth, is a process. It can feel fragile at times, but God is both patient with us and present with us, no matter what may be going on in our lives. Our call is simply to trust him, and work with him as he works in us.

As St Paul wrote to the church in Philippi: (I am) confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Let’s pray.