



### *Silence*

Hear God's word of grace and the assurance of pardon:  
Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.  
your sins are forgiven for His sake.  
Amen

### **Let us join in the Lord's Prayer. Our Father ....**

#### **Introduction to the Reading**

Four weeks ago I took the service here on the theme of Moses and the Burning Bush. Today we are continuing with the story of Moses.

Last time we thought about how God called Moses to speak to the people of Israel. They were slaves in Egypt. They were toiling in the hot sun making bricks and doing other manual jobs. They were in a desperate situation without any way of escape. But God had other ideas. He saw their suffering and He acted by asking Moses to take on the task of freeing those slaves from Egypt.

Moses felt totally inadequate to do this.

We saw how God encouraged Moses, then trained Moses, then pushed Moses into doing what God wanted him to do. That is what we thought about four weeks ago.

Today we continue that story. But we first take a big jump in the story to when the Israelites had been freed from Egypt and were living in the desert, out of reach of their former masters.

That is a big jump. So I want to take a minute to fill in the gap between God calling Moses in the desert and all the Israelites being free. For God and Moses did indeed free those thousands of slaves. They were all freed – whole families – men, women and children.

Please cast your minds back to Sunday School days when you first learned the story. Or perhaps you may find it easier to remember the films that you may have seen – Cecil B de Mille's The Ten Commandments or the more modern film The Prince of Egypt.

Moses, with his brother Aaron to help with the speaking, did go to Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. They did ask him to "set my people free". Pharaoh refused. Then God sent the Ten Plagues upon the Egyptians until Pharaoh did at last decide to let the people go.

But Pharaoh changed his mind. He sent an army to pursue the former slaves. The army caught up with the Israelites by the Red Sea. God told Moses to hold up his staff over the waters. When he did the waters parted and the Israelites passed through safely. But when the Egyptian army followed the waters rolled back and they were drowned.

This amazing story became, and remains, one of the foundation stories of Jewish identity. In the Bible we find repeated references to it. Often the people of Israel were reminded of what God did for them on that day. They praised God again and again for their miraculous escape.

But what happened next? For a few days the Israelites were on a high, singing, dancing and praising God. But now we come to our story for today. The reality of living in a desert has hit this great crowd of people. Remember that these were people used to living in a rich and fertile land with plenty of food. They are no longer happy people. In fact the opposite. Let us hear our reading.

## **Exodus 17. 1-7**

### **Address**

This is a story about Israel in the desert. The desert experience is one that we all experience at times. In a way, the present epidemic is a desert experience for all of us – a time of deprivation, worry and confusion. What can we learn from this story to help us now?

The Israelites had experienced a marvellous deliverance from slavery in Egypt. They rejoiced when they reached the other side of the Red Sea and knew that they were now safe from the Egyptian army. But then the reality of desert life hit them – a life totally different to anything that they had experienced before, a hard life.

How often have we started on something, full of hope and expectation, only to have our plans falter when the reality of what we have begun hits home? When that happens we have to decide whether to continue. If we do, we have to grit our teeth and summon up all our resources to overcome the obstacle that has presented itself.

Such is the reality of life. That is what happened to the Israelites. They were free from slavery – good. They had escaped from the Egyptian taskmasters – hurrah. But what had they escaped to? They had their herds and flocks, so they had some food with them. but finding other food was hard. Finding water for so many people and for their animals was even harder.

God had rescued them but now they had to change their way of life from being slaves to being an independent people. They had to find out more about this God who was leading them. They needed new laws and new leadership to make these refugees into a new nation. They had to look after themselves and not rely on the rations provided by the slavemasters.

Adjusting to a new way of life is never easy. We aren't finding it easy to adjust to all the changes that covid 19 has brought and is continuing to bring.

The books of Exodus and Numbers in the Bible tell us the story of how the Israelites did eventually become the people who able to enter the Promised Land and were able to settle there. There were many failures and setbacks, but also triumphs. "Best of all, God is with us" – that is what the Israelites were able to say.

This story has often been seen as a metaphor for the Christian life. The escape from Egypt is seen as a parallel to our life when we escape from sin to become Christians. The water of baptism is represented by the passing through the waters of the Red Sea.

The trials and tribulations and also the learning experiences of the Israelites in the desert are seen as a prototype of our daily Christian life with its trials and tribulations leading us to walk closer with God and to learn more of Him. The entry into the

Promised Land by crossing the River Jordan is seen as a metaphor for crossing the barrier of death to the heavenly realms.

This metaphor means a lot to me. The trials of the Israelites, the hard life in the desert, their mistakes and failures, are, I feel, an encouragement to me to overcome my problems by walking closer with God and learning from Him.

So what can we learn from our bible story today?

The Israelites were in the desert. Their number isn't known but there would have been thousands of them. They had nothing to drink. They should have trusted that God, who had looked after them so well, would continue to provide. Instead, they blamed their leader.

"Give us water to drink" they said to Moses, and "Why did **you** bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst?"

Notice how the Israelites are distorting the story of what had happened to them. They had chosen to leave Egypt because they were desperate to escape slavery. They had chosen to leave.

The situation was turning ugly. Moses was afraid that the crowd was going to stone him. Moses cried out to God for help. And that help came. He was directed to a source of underground water.

The people who live in deserts today know that in a few places there are underground streams, remnants of rivers that once watered the desert. The streams can be found by striking rocks and listening to the sounds made. Moses could have known this. He had lived in the desert before. He had lived in the desert of Midian for some years and had married into a desert family. They would have taught him a lot about surviving in that environment. With hindsight, perhaps we can say that Moses' exile in the desert proved to be God's way of training Moses for his future role?

But which rock to strike? There were rocks all over the desert. Which one was the right one? God showed to Moses where to strike. The fresh water came pouring out, enough for all of the people and their animals.

At that stage in their journey, the people of Israel reacted to a problem by blaming someone else. But Moses had learnt a better way. He trusted in God: he prayed to God: and God answered his prayer fully and effectively.

The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. It took 40 years for them to become the people that God wanted them to be – people who would listen to God and choose to live by His laws. In the desert they became a nation, a nation who was able to enter the Promised Land.

I want to conclude this address by saying that in a way, the present epidemic is a desert experience for all of us. Let us turn our time in the desert into an opportunity to learn lessons that God wants to teach us.

Our desert experience is:

A time of deprivation – which can lead us to better appreciate what we do have

Our desert experience is:

A time of worry and confusion – like the Israelites, we need to learn to trust God for our future

Our desert experience is:

A time to renew our obedience to God – how much space do we give to God in our life?

Lastly, our desert experience is:

A time to find new resources provided by God – The “Water in the Desert”.

Examples are:

- online services to watch
- prayer. See Chris’s service last week for suggestions
- our fellowship with one another, face to face, by email, zoom and telephone.

“Best of all, God is with us” - as John Wesley said.

When I was preparing this service I found a number of hymns that refer to this story and to the lessons that it gives. Let us now sing one of them.

**Hymn: StF 518 Father hear the prayer we offer:  
Not for ease that prayer shall be.  
but for strength that we may ever  
live our lives courageously.**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qd\\_K44OAvAM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qd_K44OAvAM)

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Merciful God, you renew the strength of all who wait on you.  
Fill us with your Holy Spirit, that in serving others,  
We may always be true to Christ, our Lord and our Redeemer,  
Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
One God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

There is a response to our second prayer

**To the sentence Lord as we travel the road  
Please respond Be with us and show us the way**

Dear Lord, we remember our world and the many disputes and wars that trouble it.  
May we play our part in seeking justice, a good way of life and peace for all.

**Lord as we travel the road  
Be with us and show us the way**

Next we pray for our country for an ending of this epidemic.

Lord, as our exit from the European Union draws near, we also pray for a workable settlement with our European friends.

We ask that you will guide the politicians and health leaders who have the responsibility of making decisions for us.  
Give them common sense, wisdom and strength

**Lord as we travel the road  
Be with us and show us the way**

We pray for your Church throughout the World.  
We pray for this church and for the other churches in our village  
that we may be constantly renewed by your Holy Spirit for mission and service.

**Lord as we travel the road  
Be with us and show us the way**

We pray for our friends and neighbours.  
We pray for all those who are dear to us.  
In the silence, let us pray for those we know who are in distress of mind or body. Let them know that you are there and that you bring healing and strength.  
*Pause*

**Lord as we travel the road  
Be with us and show us the way**

We offer all these prayers in the mighty name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen**

Our last hymn is the well loved Welsh hymn "Guide me, O thou great Jehovah". As we go through it, see how the hymn follows the journey of the Israelites through the desert. It is our journey too.

**Hymn: StF 465 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,  
pilgrim through this barren land;**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT4n1hGjDDg>

### **Closing Prayer**

From where we are,  
to where you now need us.

**JESUS, NOW LEAD ON**

From the familiarity of what we know,  
to the wonder of what you will reveal.

**JESUS, NOW LEAD ON**

To transform the fabric of this world,  
until it resembles the shape of your kingdom.

**JESUS, NOW LEAD ON**

Because good things have been prepared  
for those who love God.

**JESUS, NOW LEAD ON  
AMEN**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUtl3mNj5U>

This service was prepared by Angela Latham for East Leake Methodist Church.