

Dear Friends,

*Oh that today you would listen to his voice!
Harden not your hearts.*

ON their journey through the desert to the promised land the people of God were much given to “murmuring,” complaining about their lot. It did not matter how good God had been to them and how much he had already done for them, there was so often a new cause for complaint. God had given them the manna, food in the desert, which had to be gathered and eaten each day. It could not be stored, so they might well wonder if it would appear again today - a great test of their faith. But it did, God gave the manna again, he was always faithful to this promise to care for his people. Later, when they camped at Rephidim and there was no water for them to drink, they cried out, ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’ And so God bade Moses strike the rock (at a place known as Meribah and Massah, names which mean “Proof and Contention’) and water gushed forth. God always came up trumps and provided what his people needed.

This episode is recalled in Psalm 95, which provides the response above in the readings for this Sunday’s Mass: ... *harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the desert, when your fathers put me to the test, when they tried me, though they saw my work.* The psalm is known as the *Venite* from its first word, *Come - ring out our joy to the Lord*, and is regularly used to begin the daily round of prayer and worship in the Church.

I remember once being surprised by hearing a Benedictine monk, when asked what was his favourite psalm, say that it was this one. I somehow expected him to choose another, less familiar psalm rather than the *Venite*, which he would have been used to hearing every day, but he explained that it was the sense of newness, of expectation as each day begins that attracted him: *Oh that today you would listen to his voice!*

Each new day that comes to us is a gift, a new opportunity to listen to God’s voice, to experience him anew, perhaps in fresh and unexpected ways. We need to develop an alertness, a willingness to listen, to be open to God’s presence in the circumstances of our daily lives, in ourselves, in other people, in what happens to us. A writer on the way of St. Benedict put it like this: ‘God is exceedingly concrete reality, and it is only in the concrete reality of my life as it is that I can know him.’

This is what we human beings find difficult to do, because we are all subject, among other things, to the grass-is-greener-on-the-other-side syndrome: if only I lived somewhere else, if only I had a different job, if only I were married to someone else ... I would have such a wonderful life. And it may be so, God may be calling us to something else. But until we know what that is, it remains the case that is only here, only now, in my life as it is that I can be with God and know him - because this is where he is, as he is indeed in all times and places. As another psalm says, there is nowhere we can be where God is not already present.

I recall a retreat I made when I began by feeling uncomfortable and out of place. It was something I had booked well in advance and was looking forward to as I knew the place from long before and liked it, it seemed so quiet and peaceful, but I could not settle. The first day or so I wandered around at a loss, unable to pray, but then I found a prayer room in which immediately I felt at home and where I tended to go from then on. I realised in the end that what was disturbing me was the sound of traffic nearby. A main road had been enlarged since my first visit. The sound was not really that great, I probably imagined it even when I could not hear it, but I knew it had spoiled my cosy dream of what the retreat was going to be like. Once I could lay that aside and concentrate on being where I was, as it was, then I could see that God was there and there was where I could be with him. I heard afterwards that the people running the house had thought of moving when the road was enlarged, but they said, 'No, this is where we are, this is where we need to be, and God is just as much here as he would be anywhere else. Let us find strategies, ways of dealing with the unsatisfactory aspects of our current situation so we can let them be and not allow ourselves to be disturbed by them.' Except maybe in the most extreme circumstances it is always possible.

This was an important discovery for me of the presentness, the reality of God where we are here and now. It is something that we need to practise. People talk about 'the practice of the presence of God,' but the question is how do we go about that. It can only be by learning how to let go of our own desires, wishes and expectations and being content with our present situation, not so much for what it is in itself, but knowing that this is where God is.

This is not easy. We are all inclined, as God's people in the wilderness were, to look back and fondly remember the time when everything was rosy, when we were happy and contented, when everything went well (it probably it didn't in quite that way if we are honest about it!), or we are inclined to look forward and dream of the marvellous future in store for us. We can indeed remember how God has been good to us before

now and hope he will be again, but it is only here and now that we can know him and be with him. He was in the past, but that is gone. He will be in the future, but that has not yet come. For us God is in the present place and time.

We may feel like murmuring at God, why have you led us into this desert of Coronavirus? We can and probably should strive against this plague, as many are doing, not least those working for a vaccine, but I think it will help us to do that and not lose hope if we can practise being with God where we are now, Coronavirus and all. We could so easily allow our hearts to harden, but hope is after all one of the three great theological virtues, along with faith and love, so let us try to keep hope alive by letting go of our natural desires and keep reminding us that we are where God is: *Oh that t o d a y you would listen to his voice!*

With all best wishes, Fr. Robin (robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk)