

Sermon: 2020/09/27 (17th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A) - Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4,12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32_BTR

[Ask for children to come forward. An empty piñata with rod.]

A God of the Unexpected

I need a volunteer!
(Just one.)

[Child steps forward.]

Great.

Ok - imagine that its your birthday.

This time, though, I haven't two gifts for you; nope.

This time I have...a piñata.

Now, I'm British - this is foreign and exotic object to me.
So you tell me: what do you do with a piñata?

[Wait for response.]

Right!

Hit it with a stick.

Ok.

Go for it.

[The child hits the piñata repeatedly with the stick but nothing ever comes out.]

What's wrong!?

"No candy came out?"

Because that's what *should* happen when we hit this particular object.

The emptiness of the piñata was very unexpected.

Well, Moses was with the Israelites in the wilderness, escaping from slavery in Egypt, and he hit not a piñata but a rock with his stick, and something very unexpected happened too:
water came out!

From a rock that should have been full of...well, more rock! Not water.

It was a miracle.

God surprised His people with something very unexpected.

Let's pray:

Father God, ..., amen.

[Ask children to return to their places.]

On Why God Doesn't Give Us Everything We Want

So, once more, in our *Exodus* reading, we hear how God *springs* - that's a pun, by the way - to provide for the Hebrew people, the Jews.

It's so predictable, isn't it? Like clockwork.

They experienced some sort of discomfort - hunger, thirst, etc.;

they began to suffer, they complained loudly, and God - *graciously* - intervened.

And He does so each time with a *grand* gesture: giving them not just the bare minimum but providing *much* more than was even hoped for.

And that's the Gospel, right? The *unique* message of the Church:

We *all* need a *fresh* start;

we've *all* messed up and let God down. (And the people around us.)

And so He gives us a way to do that - to be forgiven; to have a "fresh start," and that's why He calls on us to 'repent' [Mt. 3:2,4:17; Mk. 1:15; Lk. 13:3, etc.]. To "bend the knee."

And that's the point of the Cross: to make things right when we do that.

But God goes above and beyond here too, for He has not only decided to look on Jesus sacrifice as *my* punishment *but* He *then* 'pours' out [see: Mk. 2:22] the 'living waters' that are the Holy Spirit to re-make our humanity,

- 'enabling [us]', and here, of course, I'm quoting Saint Paul from this morning's *Philippians* reading, 'to will and to work for His good pleasure.' [2:13]

In other words, we get instant purity thanks to Christ's death on the cross *and* the means to maintain that status - that standing with God.

Likewise, when Moses struck that rock open, the Hebrews' thirst was immediately satisfied, but not just *only* on that day at Rephidim, for we *never*, in fact, hear of the Hebrews being thirsty *again* during their wilderness hike to Canaan.

Day after day, week after week.

And yet: if God's provision, then, was reliably generous, why do they keep moaning?

And *why* doesn't God behave the same way now?

- Lots of people have desperate needs in the world.

Why doesn't He treat them the same way?

And me too! - When I'm hungry or need a drink?

Why can't I just sit in my pyjamas on the couch and spend all of my life watching the Mandalorian on Disney+?

Why doesn't He give me what I want right now always when I want it? Hm?!

The answer - in part, I think, to both these questions, is the same.

Consider this: my old boss - the rector of my last parish in England - kept chickens in his yard.

A small flock of them.

"Orpingtons," or something they were.

You know: the common reddish-orange ones like a child would draw.

And all day long they roamed around free, pecking and squawking, digging up his flowerbeds and scratching around with their talons in the compost heap;

and they could have, *at anytime(!)*, just walked away:

there was *no* fence around his yard - and though there was something of a hedge, it was *full* of gaps and holes, and *easily* passible to a small animal.

So, day after day, week after week, they had - those chickens - *ubiquitous*, almost infinite opportunities to escape, *and yet. They. Didn't.*

Why?!

Because my boss and his wife were a *dependable* source of *good* food.

And that "dependability" acted like a *powerful*, invisible leash on the birds:

- The *un-natural* regularity of being supplied cereal circumscribed those chickens' natural instinct to roam, to migrate - and to hide! From large, lumbering bipeds - like my old boss and his wife.

After all, ask yourself - imagine yourself a chicken - why embark on some risky, fox-filled adventure into the wide unknown when what you *really* craved was right there?

Being scattered on the ground at your feet every morning.

And people aren't very different to chickens.

Don't kid yourself.

- Have you heard of the expression, "helicopter parenting"?

It's the name given to an American phenomenon of mums and dads *over-indulging* their children, and it seems to be having a very negative effect on our nation's young people, causing what is being called an 'epidemic' of neuroses [n.1], and this is becoming especially evident at our universities:

According to one report (I read), '[s]tudents are increasingly seeking help for, and apparently having emotional crises over, problems of everyday life. Recent examples [included] two students who had sought counseling because they had seen a mouse in their off-campus apartment.

The[y even] called the police, who kindly arrived and set a mousetrap for them.' [n.

2]

Being accustomed to easy gratification, you see, it appears, undermines our autonomy, our resilience, our...creativity.

Getting what we want too readily warps and twists who we are - or at least certainly who we can *be*.

And in *Exodus*, it "warps and twists" the Hebrews, infantilising them.

Rather than being innovative or self-reliant, they become "cry-babies."

And don't forget: these were men and women who had survived the dreadful conditions of slavery.

And not just "survived," they had *flourished* [Ex. 1:7,12].

We heard that they multiplied - "multiplied" so much that the Egyptian state had tried to sterilize them.

They were, in other words, *tough*, hard, *capable* people.

That is to say, they *had* been.

But God's *repeated* acts of abundance creates an addiction in them for easy-living, which won't abide even fleeting moments of difficulty.

But difficulty is what we should expect to encounter:

this life on earth was created to be 'very good'. That's God's judgement of it, declared in *Genesis* (chapter) one [v.31].

But "very good" is *far* short of "perfect" - of paradise, of "The (coming) Kingdom."

And so we should expect - and prepare for - hard times,

especially as those aspiring to be disciples [Mt. 10:16-20],

and *especially* as culture and society become less hospitable to our Faith and faithfulness.

The ultimate solution *is* Jesus' return [see, e.g.: Is. 2:4; Rev. 21:4], yes, but until then we mustn't sit on our hands, waiting - *impatiently* - for that, when there is so much that we can do with a little ingenuity and a lot of "heart" - characteristics that God Himself has endowed us with, and must have done so for a purpose: Most injustice, after all, *most suffering*, is avoidable, *human-caused* injustice and suffering:

conditions and situations that I myself may be responsible for, even if only in slight, subtle ways.

And if I can make a difference, what's stopping me from doing so?

Footnotes:

1. <http://www.chronicle.com/article/An-Epidemic-of-Anguish/232721/>
2. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201509/declining->

student-resilience-serious-problem-colleges