

MASSAH AND MERIBAH

The place was named Massah and Meribah because of the grumbling of the sons of Israel and because they put Yahweh to the test saying, 'Is Yahweh with us or not?'

EXODUS 17.7

What a question! After all that God had done for them, the Israelites ask, 'Is Yahweh with us or not?'

Four hundred years of slavery have been brought to an end; a multitude the size of the population of Birmingham have been liberated; they have plundered their enemies; they have seen them not only defeated but drowned; they have been led to freedom by the safest route, guided by cloud and fire, sustained on the march with heavenly food - and yet when the going gets tough they rebel; they grumble; they moan; and they ask, 'Is God really with us or not?' No wonder Moses was at breaking point: 'How am I to deal with this people?' he cries out to God. 'A little more and they will stone me!'

It's not that the people were always complaining. At times they were ready to trust Yahweh. As they watched their enemies flounder in the mud of the Sea of Reeds they venerated Yahweh; 'they put their faith in Yahweh and in Moses his servant.' It is easy to accept the good things from the hand of God, but not adversity. In tough times even slavery can seem preferable to freedom. When hunger gripped the Israelites slavery seemed the better option and they turned against Moses: 'Were there no graves in Egypt that you must lead us out to die in the wilderness? What good have you done us, bringing

us out of Egypt?... Better to work for the Egyptians than die in the wilderness!' Yet despite the complaining God continued to provide for his people. When they complained that there was nothing to drink, Yahweh led them to Horeb where water is struck from the rock.

The picture of God painted in the story of the Exodus is one who is jealous for his people and concerned for their future. Sometimes that picture faces us with an unacceptable moral dimension. What sort of God is it who hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he can visit even greater plagues on Pharaoh's people? I don't find that picture of God attractive; in fact, such a God is a monster, unworthy of worship. But alongside that is today's picture of a God who bears the complaining of the Israelites; who provides for them despite their ingratitude; who stays with them even though they are getting nowhere.

In seeking guidance from this story we need to remember that God does not change. He is the same today, yesterday and for ever. It is our perception of him that changes. You can see this change of perception in the OT. In the Exodus Yahweh is pictured as a tribal champion; he is one god among many. The defeat of the Egyptians shows that Yahweh is stronger than the Egyptian god. And if he is a tribal champion it is reasonable for his tribe to expect that he will fix everything to their advantage, including plentiful supplies of water, without their having to complain first.

That is one picture of God. Move on many centuries to the Exile, the next most formative event in the history of Israel after the Exodus, and you have another picture to set beside it. In the midst of desolation, in captivity in Babylon, an un-named prophet known as Second Isaiah sees that Yahweh is not the tribal champion of Israel but the God of all nations; not one god among many, but the only God:

Thus says the Lord ...
I am the first and I am the last,
and there is no god but me. (*Isaiah 44.6*)

Second Isaiah pictures God as righteous and ethical. Israel cannot expect of him special treatment. Adversity must be accepted from his hand as well as good, for his concerns are wider than those of Israel.

How do we choose between these pictures? For Christians the OT has to be approached through the perspective of the NT. It is in Jesus that God has given us a picture that is definitive. He is the standard by which we are to judge. Michael Ramsay, the great Archbishop of Canterbury, said in God there is nothing that is un-Christlike, and it is instructive that when the first Christians looked in the OT for a picture of God that prefigured the one they had seen in Jesus, it was to Second Isaiah that they turned. We do not have to accept all the OT pictures of God, the morally acceptable and the morally repellent, and somehow hold them together. We can reject the picture of the God of the plagues because, quite simply, it is un-Christlike. But we can't pick apart the picture of God in Jesus. With him it is the whole picture or nothing, and part of that picture is obedience when the going gets tough.

This came home to me when I first visited Jerusalem and went one evening to the Church of All Nations in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is built around the Rock of the Agony where Jesus poured out his grief: 'Father, if it be your will, take this cup from me. Yet not my will but yours be done.' (*Luke 22.42*) As I sat and looked at that rock, I realised what that obedience cost.

God did not fix it for Jesus, and he will not fix it for us, but even so we continue to behave as though he is our personal Mr Fixit and put him to the test. It happens often in illness. We pray but there is no

cure; 'Why?' we cry. 'What sort of God would allow this suffering?' The same questions come easily to our lips when we look at the state of the world. But if we want a world in which love rules, we need to remember that this is not possible without suffering.

People often put God to the test when we want to believe: 'If only,' we say, 'God would send us a sign. I'd believe then.' But God doesn't do deals. As Jesus said, it is a perverse generation that asks for a sign. A faith built on miracles has no depth. Depth in faith comes through learning to recognise the hand of God in ordinary life: in human love and self-sacrifice, in the wonders of nature, in the skill of the surgeon and the engineer.

In a different way we put God to the test with our protestations of unworthiness. Is it for nothing that God has made us in his image; that he has put his Spirit within us? Would God share the gifts he has given us with those he accounted unworthy. Do we not see that in protesting our unworthiness we reject his gifts and we reject his love?

We put God to the test every time we expect him to be our tribal champion. He is tested every time Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus pray to him to favour their cause. God has shown us the way we should live. It is summed up in the Hebrew word *shalom*: not just peace, but peace-with-justice – and justice comes first.

The place where the Israelites complained against God was called Massah and Meribah. *Massah* means 'test', and *Meribah* means 'dispute'. Time and again we create our own Massah and Meribah, testing and disputing with God. Too often it is only when we are tested that we begin to ask the difficult questions about faith, and about God. If this is so, we have left it too late. It is in the good times that we need to ask the hard questions so that when adversity strikes, as it will, we have the spiritual resources to cope with it.

Picture Mary and John standing at the foot of the Cross. Their grief must have been as much as they could bear, but they were not overwhelmed. Why? Because they had spent time with Jesus in his life, and so they were not destroyed by his death.

Faith is a decision to trust. Moses, Mary, John made that decision and then lived their lives learning what it meant. They were not continually expecting special deals or favours from God, not putting him to the test, but learning that the only thing that can never be overcome is God's love. This is what the resurrection means. In Jesus God says to us, 'You we can trust me with your life.' Our journey in the good times is to learn precisely that, so that in the times of testing our faith fails and we find ourselves disputing with God.