

18th Sunday After Pentecost

Exodus 17.1-7

Psalm 78.1-4; 78.11-16

Philippians 2

Matthew 21.23-32

Rev'd Lauren Martin

Listen for the Water

Have you ever noticed how different the world looks when you're thirsty?

On a hot summer afternoon, the air can feel thick enough to lean against. The road shimmers. Leaves hang still. Your throat feels scratchy, your skin damp, and the water bottle you were sure had plenty left gives you only the faintest swallow. Then you hear it — the sudden splash of a tap, the silver rush of water into a sink, the clink of ice in a glass — and for a moment it feels like grace has a sound.

That is where Exodus begins today: with thirst.

The people of Israel are deep in the wilderness, tired and frightened. Their children are thirsty. Their animals are thirsty. The dust is in their mouths, and fear is rising like heat off stone. So they turn on Moses and ask the question that sits underneath all the sharp words: "Is the Lord among us or not?"

It is an ancient question. But it is also a very near one.

We ask it in hospital corridors and in sleepless nights.

In seasons of grief.

In the strain of money worries.

In family tensions.

In the ache of loneliness.

And sometimes when the world around us feels brittle and frayed, when what should sustain life feels uncertain, we ask it there too.

Is the Lord among us or not?

And what is so tender in this story is that God does not answer with anger. God answers with water.

Water from rock.

Coolness from hardness.

A stream where there should have been only stone.

The psalm remembers this moment like a family story told around the table: God opened the rock, and the waters flowed. Not because the people were calm or noble or full of faith, but because God is faithful. God sees thirst and responds with life.

Then, in the Gospel, the scene changes. Now the question is about authority. The religious leaders want to know who Jesus thinks he is. And Jesus answers with a story that is so simple it slips quietly past our defences.

Two children are asked to work in the vineyard. One says yes, but never goes. The other says no, but later changes their mind and goes.

And Jesus asks: which one did the will of the father?

It is a question not just about words, but about lives.

Because we all know how easy it is to say the right thing. To sound kind. To appear faithful. To mean well. But Jesus is gently drawing us toward something deeper: the slow, real turning of the heart that becomes action.

And that is where Philippians gives us the shape of Christ's life: not grasping, not clinging, not needing to win — but emptying, serving, loving.

The mind of Christ is not hard or sharp-edged.

It is spacious.

It is humble.

It notices.

It makes room.

And perhaps that is the invitation for us.

When life becomes dry, when fear makes us brittle, when blame comes easily and compassion feels costly — what kind of people will we be?

Will we be people who add to the heat?

Or people through whom some coolness comes?

Will we cling tightly to being right?

Or will we let grace soften us?

Will we only say yes with our lips?

Or will we let love take flesh in what we do?

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The good news is that God is still able to bring water from rock. Still able to bring tenderness out of what has gone hard in us. Still able to turn us, however slowly, from refusal to response, from fear to trust, from words into love.

So perhaps this week, when you wash your hands, fill the kettle, water a thirsty plant, or lift a cold glass to your lips, let it remind you: the grace of God is often like this — simple, necessary, quietly sustaining life.

And when you find yourself asking, “Is the Lord among us or not?” — listen for the water.

Listen for the signs of life.

Look for the small mercies.

Trust that Christ is among us still, meeting our thirst, softening our hearts, and teaching us the gentle authority of love.

And may God give us grace to drink deeply, to love generously, and to become for one another a small stream of Christ’s peace. Amen.