

I like words- you may have noticed. One of my favourite words is 'coddiwomple', which means 'to travel in a purposeful manner towards a vague destination'. It's what you do when you are on holiday with plenty of time; set off on a coddiwomple to discover whatever there is to be found.

The journey of the Hebrew people who followed Moses out of Egypt doesn't fit the definition of a coddiwomple. They knew their destination- the Promised Land; it was a real place, not a vague uncertainty. But they didn't travel in a purposeful manner, far from it: they wandered around for forty years. That makes getting lost in a strange city or country look like nothing in comparison!

They dithered and dilly-dallied, moaning and complaining at poor old Moses. 'We haven't got any food- why did you drag us away from Egypt?' So Moses asked God, and there was manna, and quails, and plenty to eat.

Whenever they were in need, Moses prayed and God provided, but they kept forgetting. They didn't learn that they could trust God even when they had experienced God's provision time and again.

Today we heard the story of the people once again crying out to Moses that they couldn't find any water. They moaned and carried on until he cried out to God in frustration.

God then reminded Moses that he carried in his hand the staff that he'd used in Egypt to strike the River Nile, turning the water to blood. Just as Moses had tried to remind the people that God had always looked after them before, so God reminded Moses that he already had the tools to do what was needed- his trusty staff.

Off he went, with the elders, did as God said, and there was water coming out of the rock. Moses called the place 'Massah', meaning 'test', and 'Meribah', meaning 'quarrel'. I get the sense that he'd had a gut-full by then.....

Psalms 95 also tells the story, reminding the people of Israel of their lack of trust in God.

Today's gospel reading is also about water, at least superficially. Jesus and his followers were travelling through Samaria and he sat down by the well, tired and thirsty, while the disciples went into town to buy food.

It is a familiar story and I am sure many of you know it. A local woman came along with her bucket to get some water, and Jesus asked her for a drink- breaking all kinds of social and religious taboos. In that society, at that time, Jews and Samaritans were not on speaking terms; and this person was not only a despised Samaritan but a woman as well, shock horror! She was a person no right-thinking, up-standing Jew would consider speaking to, particularly to ask for something.

As we know Jesus was not afraid to ignore social conventions and made a habit of talking with, eating with, and even touching people who were outcasts or at least disreputable.

Jesus told the unnamed woman that he knew she'd had at least five failed relationships and was currently living with someone. She rapidly changed the subject and they got into a theological debate about the right place to worship and who the Messiah might be.

Our English translation tells us that in answer to her question Jesus said, "I am he." The original Greek simply says, "I am". She would have known that this is God's name- I AM.

Then along came the disciples and the woman went running back to town, telling everybody about the amazing man she had just met.

As a result, many Samaritans became believers, fulfilling what Jesus said about the fields being ready for harvest: there were, as there are now, many people who are ripe and ready to hear and respond to the Good News.

What does it actually mean, to hear and respond to the Gospel? Paul tells us in the letter to the Roman church that it means having peace with God, being reconciled to God, and becoming who we were always intended to be: God's beloved children.

The woman at the well was able to run around telling people that Jesus knew she had a somewhat interesting marital history- but he loved her anyway. She belonged to a people who thought of themselves as Jewish, but the people of Israel thought of as foreigners, outsiders, not real proper Jews at all- but he loved her anyway.

Jesus offers unconditional acceptance and unlimited love. That doesn't mean we can behave as badly as we want, because our behaviour affects our relationships with God and other people. Love is a two-way relationship, and Jesus asks us to love God, our neighbours, and ourselves.

Paul writes about suffering because to be human will always involve suffering, but he encourages us to remember the positive results of endurance, character, and hope.

It is impossible to remember that while we are suffering, because pain- emotional, spiritual or physical- is all-encompassing, requiring all our energy and attention. It is only when the worst is over that we might be able to reflect on the experience and perhaps recognise that we have grown.

The current Covid-19 crisis may be a case in point. We don't know yet how our lives might be affected, here in Western Australia, but in common with other crises- bushfires, natural disasters and so on- it can be an opportunity for personal and corporate growth.

We can demonstrate our love for those around us by responding to whatever restrictions are put upon us with patience and grace. We can and must look out for our neighbours, especially those who are vulnerable. We can look for opportunities to support and care for people as individuals and as a church.

We are in a situation not dissimilar to that of those ancient people who followed Moses- wandering in the wilderness, wondering what's going to happen next. (I'm fairly sure it won't last 40 years though...)

We are on a journey through unknown territory, but we are on it together. Best of all, we know that God is right here with us and always will be.