

"Familiarity Doesn't Always Breed Contempt"

Text: Exodus 17:1-7

2-5-2012

I remember one occasion, when I was a kid of about 10 or 11, when I ate too much chocolate cake at my Grandma O'Connor's house. My grandma could really bake, and her cakes were legendary. On this occasion she had made a chocolate cake with super rich icing, and I dove into it like it was the last cake on earth. I remember my mom warning me that if I ate too much and got sick on it, then I'd probably never like cake again. And she was right. I ate so much of that chocolate cake that I got a stomach ache, and to this day chocolate cake is one of my least favorite deserts.

What I did that day at my grandma's house was have too much of a good thing. There's a saying that speaks of that: Familiarity breeds contempt. And we see that on display in today's O.T. Lesson. Of course, there it's not so much the case of there being too much of a *good* thing, but rather too much of a *bad* thing. What's interesting about that though is that that familiarity did NOT breed contempt. Let me show you what I mean ...

As I do, I invite you to return with me to today's O.T. Lesson, where we hear again that:

"All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. "(Exodus 17: 1)

This was soon after Moses had led the people of Israel to safety from the chariots of the Egyptian Pharaoh and his army, who had chased them from Egypt to the banks of the Red Sea. As we were reminded last week, Israel had been in bondage in Egypt, and God had used Moses to work 10 plagues on its land, breaking the will of Pharaoh and moving him to set Israel free. But as we also heard last week, Pharaoh had a change of heart, and pursued Israel to the banks of the sea. After God used Moses to part the waters of the sea and lead the children of Israel safely through to the other side, the Egyptians were drowned in the sea, and Israel was free to continue her journey to the land God had promised to give their forefathers.

The Israelites were eventually brought to the foot of Mt. Sinai, on which God met with Moses to give them the Word of His covenant with them - which included, of course, what we know today as the "10 Commandments." It was before that gathering at Sinai, in the early part of their journey from the Red Sea, that the events of today's O.T. Lesson took place, as Exodus goes on to tell us that:

"... the people quarreled with Moses and said: 'Give us water to drink. "(v .2!!

Last week we spoke of familiarity, and of how a lot of the way Moses is presented is familiar to us because of the way Jesus is presented. This week we have a different kind of

familiarity on display, as the people of Israel grumble and complain against God and His servant Moses. The complaining is familiar to us because we've heard it before in the book of Exodus ...

We heard it in chapter 6, when Moses was first sent to the Israelites to tell them how God was going to use him to lead them to freedom. Exodus says that, on that occasion:

" ... they did not listen to Moses on account of their despondency and cruel bondage."(v.9)

We heard it in chapter 14: On that occasion Israel was trapped by the Red Sea, and the people said:

"Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? .. Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'?"(vs. IIa, 12a)

We heard it in the chapter immediately before today's O. T. Lesson, where Israel grew hungry on her journey. Exodus tells us that, on that occasion:

"The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron (Moses' brother, and helper) in the wilderness."(16:2)

By the time we get to today's text in Exodus 17 - and remember that we're still very early in Israel's journey to the Promised Land - we're familiar with Israel's complaints. Like Moses (poor guy), we've heard it before.

But how do we respond to it? Do we respond to it with contempt? Does familiarity with Israel's complaining breed in us contempt? It may. I know that when I read the story of Moses and Israel, I often find myself shaking my head in wonder at how they could be so selfish and unappreciative. Perhaps you too find yourself shaking your head, and wondering how God could be so patient with them?

But here's the thing: God *was* patient with Israel. He provided for them, at every turn, even though they never seemed to stop grumbling and complaining. He certainly provided for them in today's O.T. Lesson, as Exodus tells us that God told Moses to take the staff that he used to work the plagues in Egypt (with the first of those plagues: turning the Nile river into blood, being mentioned in today's text), and use it to bring water from a rock. Exodus says it this way:

"Behold, I (i.e., God) will stand before you there on the rock ... , and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.' And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel."(17:6)

That's the way it was for Israel with God - in spite of her never seeming to be satisfied with His care for her, God *did care* for her, providing everything she needed.

Think about it: Israel complained in Egypt, and God worked 10 plagues, setting her free. Israel complained at the Red Sea, and God parted it so she could walk through on dry ground. Israel complained of hunger, and God fed her with quail, and manna from above. Israel complained of thirst, and God quenched it with water from a rock. At every turn, in spite of her NOT being appreciative, God never left Israel to provide for herself. God's familiarity with Israel's complaining did NOT breed within Him contempt.

The same goes for us. We too have many times when we feel like grumbling against God. Like Israel, we may hunger; we may thirst; we may desire things to be different than they are, and when they're not, we wonder if God still cares; if God is still with us, leading us through life? Israel wondered that, as Exodus tells us that she tested the Lord by saying:

"Is the Lord among us or not?"(v.7)

In other words:

"Has God abandoned us to make our own way through the wilderness? Or is He still with us, leading us to the Land of Promise?"(p-phrase)

With water from a rock Israel was shown very clearly that God *was* still with her. And with the water that once flowed from the side of God's Son on Calvary's cross - a water washed over us in the waters of our Baptism - we are shown that God is always with us:

"I will be with you always," Jesus said when He instituted Holy Baptism, "even unto the very end of the age."(Matthew 28:20)

The Lord Jesus Christ is the Rock from which all God's people drink in faith. As St. Paul says in today's Epistle, referring to Israel's journey through the wilderness:

" ... they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ."(1 Corinthians 10:4)

My dear friends in Christ, the Lord Jesus took upon Himself all grumbling and complaining, all failure to trust in God's goodness - both the failure of ancient Israel, as well as the failure of all of us here today and suffered its just desserts in death on a cross. Or to put it in terms of our theme for today: the Lord Jesus Christ took upon Himself all the sin with which God is all too familiar, and suffered in our place its contempt. Now when we struggle with our all-too-familiar sinful flesh, we can know that it does NOT breed contempt of us from God, but pity, and mercy, and love. That is so because of the Rock from which we drink, the Rock that St. Paul says is Christ.

Which brings us back to where we began, where we said that too much of something can be bad for us - certainly too much of a bad thing is bad for us, but too much of a good thing can also be bad (e.g., my experience with chocolate cake). What we've seen today is that that is NOT the case with our Lord Jesus Christ. Familiarity with Him *never* breeds contempt. Indeed -

- in His ✠ Name,

Amen!