

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 15th March 2020 11am

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Ps 95v8: Do not harden your hearts.

The context matters. I've titled this sermon 'The Rock of our Salvation' which is a phrase that appears in the psalm we read – 'Come, let us sing to the Lord, let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.'

Psalm 95 is something of a staple in worship services – it was set by Cranmer in the first version of the Book of Common Prayer for Mattins (or Morning Prayer) and has been widely used in that way ever since. Except, for Cranmer in 1549 the phrase was translated 'the strength of our salvation' – because that is what it means, isn't it? God is described as a rock elsewhere in the psalms and it is obvious what that means. A rock is a symbol of strength, of solidity, of reliability. A rock is firm, durable, predictable. God is to be praised because on God we can rely utterly.

On God we can rely utterly. Of course we can, but it seems to me that Psalm 95 reminds us of that truth in a particular way. Far be it from me to take issue with Thos Cranmer, great scholar, liturgist, and archbishop, but I can't help feeling that something has been missed here. Because the context matters. Later in the psalm the people are urged not to harden their hearts 'as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness.' We know what happened at Massah and Meribah as we heard it in our first reading.

This was the place where the people challenged Moses about the lack of water and grew so angry with him that Moses feared for his life. The Lord commanded Moses to take the people to 'the rock at Horeb' and there to strike the rock with his staff 'and water will come out of it.' And Moses did so and named the place in memory of the quarrel that the people had had with him. That is the reference that the psalmist picks up so the rock of our salvation to which the Psalmist draws our attention is not a symbol of dry

solidity but an experience of God that promises hope at a point of despair, rescue in a time of crisis, water in a place of dryness, and abundant life when death threatens. The context matters.

The context matters. There may be far fewer people in churches today and next Sunday than we might have expected. We will celebrate Holy Communion without sharing the peace, we will be particularly careful about how we distribute the elements, we are discouraged from shaking hands with one another as we usually do. These changes reflect what is going on (or not going on) beyond the walls of the church. Those who are shopping in our supermarkets will probably find that there are no eggs or flour or painkillers or fruit juice or toilet paper to be had, that the normally full shelves are oddly half-empty. Sporting events have been cancelled; some offices have closed; we wait on further Government advice about whether or not other plans need to change. You cannot fly to the US or to Poland; you are advised not to go to certain other places. The level of anxiety and of uncertainty is almost palpable and the television news resembles the first pages of a dystopian novel. Everything we do or intend to do appears in a different light because of Covid 19. And in that context, our Psalmist takes us with the Israelites to a place of panic, leads us to the rock at Horeb, and urges us not to harden our hearts.

Apparently, the Israelites did harden their hearts and, to be frank, I have some sympathy with them. Water is an essential of life; in a dry wilderness they were looking for an oasis and Moses had not led them to one. They had families to look after, they had livestock to keep alive, they themselves were parched – and there was no water. It is not surprising that they complained and wondered if Moses knew what he was doing. Had the Lord really taken him and them to a place that could not support life? They were not only looking for water – they were looking for leadership and we can understand why. These people had not been raised to be nomads knowing how to find food and drink in a barren land. They had lived, albeit as slaves, amid the plenty of Egypt with the annual flooding of the Nile. This was for them an unprecedented situation and when confronted with the

unfamiliar - and especially when the unfamiliar is life-threatening - it is only natural to look for answers. Small wonder they went to Moses and demanded to know where God was in all this.

But in asking that question, the people forgot all that God had done for them. 'Your ancestors tested me and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.' God through Moses had plagued the Egyptians whilst sparing the Hebrews; God had forced Pharaoh to emancipate the slaves and allow them to leave his territory; God had made a path across the Red Sea when the people seemed to be at the mercy of Pharaoh's army; and God had destroyed the forces of Egypt as they pursued the Hebrews across that sea. All this God had done, and yet as soon as there was no water the people abandoned their trust in God and complained to Moses. You also, the Psalmist proclaims to a later generation, you also have seen what God has done – not the miracles of the Exodus but the wonders of creation. 'The sea is his, for he made it; his hands moulded the dry land.' So do not harden your hearts at moments of crisis or uncertainty. Do not refuse to trust God who has done so much, who does so much, who will do so much in ways that you might not imagine.

If this morning's psalm reminds us to trust and not to harden our hearts towards God in times of emergency, our gospel reading urges us not to harden our hearts against our neighbour. We meet again the rock of our salvation, the one who offers streams of living water: we meet Jesus at the well at Sychar - and again, the context matters. The writer of the fourth gospel stresses the social norms that appear to be broken when Jesus engages in conversation with the woman who comes to draw water: he is a man, she is a woman; he is a Jew, she is a Samaritan; he is a rabbi, she might be someone of (let us say) an unconventional lifestyle. But the barriers are broken and he offers her a new relationship with God and a message of hope that sends her running to tell others that she has met someone who in a few sentences has transformed her life.

One of the phrases that has become common currency in the last few days is 'social distancing'. We are being asked to minimize certain forms of interaction, to touch much less than we usually do, to 'self-isolate' if we display symptoms of the disease or have been to places where it is rife - in short to keep our distance from others. Of course, all that is right and one of the main tasks for those of us who work in Marylebone Road this week will be to figure out what that needs to mean in practice for our activities as Methodists. But 'social distancing' can have a sinister sound to it. One of the dangers in a time of epidemic is that we look at our neighbours with fear. Of course it is illogical that Chinese restaurants have been more badly hit than others by the drop in custom because Covi-19 first came to light in Wuhan but that appears to be the case. We keep our distance because we are being sensible not because we view one another with suspicion, though it is easy for the two to be confused. Social distancing can become social distrust. 'Do not harden your hearts.'

Maybe the Church has something distinctive to say into this. Maybe the Church needs to be the community that promises not to allow social distancing to morph into distrust. Is now the time to make sure that our neighbours are well, to pick up the telephone to check on those whom we have not seen today when we expected to see them? Is now the time to use other media to contact the self-isolating, to ensure them of our prayers, to offer help if shopping is a problem? Is now the time not to forget but rather to make the extra gift to the foodbank or to the outreach projects here when so much is disappearing from supermarket shelves? Is now the time for us to ask how we can help those who are least protected? Do not harden your hearts.

I can't remember a time in my life when it felt like this; the global pandemic has shaken us in a way that I can't recall happening before. It might be that this time next week we'll have been advised not to conduct services at all – you could all be at home with resources for worship on the internet. We just don't know if some things will happen or will not, we don't know how long it will be until we are over the worst or what further

measures might need to be taken - but this we do know: that in our midst is Christ, the rock of our salvation. He is the water of life and offers us the assurance that we need in a crisis. He invites us to trust in him and with him to trust each other. 'O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.' For thousands of years that psalm has been said or sung – in times of national celebration or national emergency, in peace and in war, by Jews and Christians in sickness and in health. The context matters – but even where the context is frightening, unprecedented, and uncertain God is still God and we are still God's people.