15 April 2018: Matins
The Third Sunday of Easter
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+ ‘So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.’ (1 Cor 10: 12)

On weekday mornings since Easter Day, regular worshippers at Matins have been reading their way through the book of the Exodus. We have followed the fate of the Israelites from the institution of the first Passover, through the crossing of the Red Sea, to their first – distinctly mixed – experiences in the wilderness. After their great joy (and relief) at having safely been led over the sea-bed, while the army of the Egyptians (all Pharaoh’s horses, chariots and chariot-drivers) were enveloped in the pillar of cloud before drowning in the returning waters, the congregation of the Israelites soon began to struggle with the realities of life in the wilderness.

They hungered and thirsted, complaining constantly to Moses and Aaron, and asking repeatedly whether it would not have been better for them to have died in slavery in Egypt (where at least they could have sat by the fleshpots and eaten their fill of bread) rather than to suffer in this wilderness until they died of starvation (Ex. 16: 3). Yet, despite their faithless ingratitude, and their ceaseless moaning, God listened to Israel’s woes and tried to spare their leaders the worst of the people’s anger. He enabled Moses to sweeten the bitter waters of Marah with a block of wood, fed the Israelites by dropping manna from heaven, and let Moses to bring water from the rock at Horeb when he struck it with his staff. God was faithful; although he tried and tested the people, he brought them ultimately to the Promised Land.

It was of those events on the journey through the wilderness that Paul wrote to the people of Corinth at the start of our second reading. By the time that he composed this letter, Christians had already begun to re-interpret the texts of the Hebrew scriptures with which those of Jewish origin were familiar, reading them not just as historical narratives of events that had occurred in Israel’s distant past, but allegorically.
Both people and historical events came to be understood as types, prefiguring the people and events of which the gospels told. Thus Adam, the first man, father of all humanity, of whom we read in Genesis, prefigured the second Adam, Christ. As Paul would explain a little later in this letter – and as we said in the Easter anthems that we recited at the start of this service – ‘For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive’ (1 Cor 15: 20).

So, in this passage, Paul drew a direct correlation between the church in his present time and the Israelites wandering in the desert. Our ancestors, the people of Israel, walked under the cloud and passed through the sea: that, he explained, prefigures the baptism by which new Christians are initiated into the faith. The spiritual food with which God fed the people in the desert, the manna that rained down upon them for forty years, represents the body of Christ eaten at the eucharistic table. Similarly, the water struck from the rock at Horeb symbolises Christ’s blood. For the rock was Christ himself. Other early Church fathers including Origen would interpret the pillar of cloud that led the people through the wilderness and then enveloped the pursuing Egyptian army, as representing the Holy Spirit. In similar vein, St Ambrose explained how Moses’ act of sweetening the bitter waters of Marah by throwing in a piece of wood brings to mind the wood of the cross: ‘for water without the preaching of the cross of the Lord is of no avail for future salvation. But after it has been consecrated by the mystery of the saving cross, it is made suitable for the use of the spiritual laver [ie for baptism] and of the cup of salvation (Ambrose, On the mysteries, 3: 14) Re-reading this narrative in the early mornings on the days since Easter has brought the typological significance of that story back to the forefront of our minds. ‘O come hither and behold the works of the Lord’, we said when we read today’s psalm: ‘how wonderful he is in his doing toward the children of men.’ (Ps 66: 4)

As Paul explained to the early church in Corinth, those events in the wilderness occurred in order to serve as examples to succeeding generations. Not only to those generations that lived under the law, but to the new Israel living after Christ’s incarnation and thus after the full meaning of those earlier occurrences had been made manifest through the salvic acts of Christ’s life, passion and death and above all his resurrection from the dead. Paul wanted to ensure that his gentile audience understood that these stories of past events were now their stories, too (no long the exclusive preserve of the Jews). ‘These things happened to them [ancient Israel] to serve as an example, and were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.’
That inherited tradition of instances in which the Israelites in the wilderness behaved badly (and doubted God’s faithfulness) had a useful teaching purpose for Paul. He rehearsed their past failures as a means of instructing the Corinthians on the errors they should avoid, in the hope of preventing them from repeating the blunders of the past.

In the three-year cycle of lectionary readings for the Eucharist, this passage from Paul’s letter is prescribed for the third Sunday of Lent in year C. The gospel for that Sunday contains a narrative that occurs uniquely in Luke, describing the execution of some Galileans by Pilate, and the accidental death of eighteen people following the collapse of the tower of Siloam. The evangelist gave meaning to those events in Christ’s stark warning: ‘unless you repent, you will all perish as they did’ (Luke 13: 1-5). In mid-Lent one can readily draw out a relevant message from St Paul’s prescriptions to the Corinthians, particularly his warnings against the dangers of idol worship, and see how obviously they apply to a time of penitence and self-reflection. But we are not in Lent any more. We are an Easter people, and alleluia is our song. We now confidently proclaim: Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed.] Rejoicing that we have a great high priest, who has passed through the heavens, we can hold firmly to the faith we profess. (Heb. 4: 14) Why, then, are we again in this season reminded against the idolatry of eating and drinking, the immorality that led to the slaughter of twenty-three thousand, or the testing of God that was punished by serpents?

The key to the whole passage lies near its end: ‘So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.’ (v. 12) Paul’s words warn us against complacency, over confidence and the mistaken belief that we have the capacity to journey through life alone, standing on our own feet, dependent on our own resources. To think thus is to fall into the sin of pride, a pride that places us above others, far from the ground on which they rest. Humility (a word which derives from the Latin word for the ground or earth, *humus*) requires us to recognise our need for external support in order to thrive. We must appreciate our need for the mutual support and sustenance that we gain from our belonging to a community of believers, the body of Christ, with whom we stand humbly on the ground, journeying together through the wilderness of human existence. Only then can we come closer to recognising the love of Christ and understanding his proclamations of justice and peace for all the world.
To acknowledge our humility and our dependence on God and others requires us also to remember the promises that we made (or were made for us) at our baptisms. We renewed those promises beside the font on Easter Eve, when we celebrated Christ’s passing from death to resurrected life. Just as the people of Israel passed through the sea and were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, so were we cleansed in the waters of baptism; we died then to sin in order to be reborn in Christ Jesus. Baptism is a sacrament performed only once, but we live with its enduring consequences every day. As God calls us to live the truth of the gospel, he calls us continually to die and rise again with Christ. Our baptismal vocations should encourage us daily to rethink the meaning of Christian community and our shared obligations to support one another, to walk beside those who are being tested, and to comfort them with the promises of God’s faithfulness. Nor should we forget our shared vocations to serve the needs of the world outside the comfortable spaces of the church, to tell of our gospel hope and our trust in God to those who have not known the joys that faith can bring.

RS Thomas’ poem, ‘The bright field’, reminds us of the futility of living life without thought for God’s promises, above all the promises of eternal salvation brought to us through Christ’s redeeming death and resurrection

Life is not hurrying
on to a redeeming future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

We may have forgotten our own baptisms; we may have neglected to strive to grow in Christ. We may already have forgotten the joy with which we greeted the risen Christ on Easter morning, our dawning understanding of the fulfilment of all the things that the scriptures had foretold would happen. But God is faithful; his promises endure for ever. And, as Paul reminded us, however difficult we may sometimes find to believe this, he will not test us beyond our endurance, provided that we do not fall into the temptation of believing that we can stand alone without him. God is faithful: ‘O come hither and behold the works of God, how wonderful he is toward the children of men.’