

# **“Big Question 11: Can God really help us?”**

**Sunday 29 March 2009**

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## **Readings:**

Exodus 15: 22-27

Mark 9: 14 - 29

## **Sermon**

Can God really help us?

Today's the last of our “Big Questions” series....and it strikes me as being ever so nearly the same as the first question of the series “Does God really care?” which Brian preached on back on 11<sup>th</sup> January.

Perhaps they are two ways of asking the question “Does God really love us?” and it brings us back, closes the loop, and perhaps reminds us that we often re-visit the big questions time and again in our Christian lives.

For the people of Israel - their situation in today's reading which Rachel read to us is very different to how it was back at the beginning of Exodus, when Moses was the baby in the basket and his people were being ruthlessly exploited as slaves by the new king of Egypt.

In today's reading they are free – God has rescued them from Egypt in an amazing and miraculous way.

In the end, not only did Pharaoh let them go, but he plied them with treasure and sent them away.

He then had a change of heart, and chased after them, but God led the people through the Red Sea by parting it so they walked through on dry land ... and then when the Egyptian chariots got to that point the waters flowed again, and the chariot wheels were trapped in the mud and the pursuing Egyptian armies were destroyed, and the people of Israel really were free from slavery.

And at the end of Chapter 14 it says:

*“When the Israelites saw the great power of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.”*

and the first 18 verses of chapter 15 are a song of praise to God, sung by Moses and his sister Miriam and all the people of Israel.

I considered asking Rob to play it for us, but the music didn't seem to be in any of our books....so if you have a Bible there just have a look at this song – Exodus 15, on page 72.

*“I will sing to the Lord”* it starts, *“for he is highly exalted, the horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea”*

All the doubts and questions of the long and painful process of Moses leading them out of slavery –

"Who does Moses think he is?"

"How can we believe God will do this?"

"What if Pharaoh says no?"

"There you go – Pharaoh has said no and now things are even worse, thanks to Moses....."

All these doubts are swept away in this outpouring of praise to God.

*The Lord is my strength and my song*

*He is my God and I will praise him*

*Who among the gods is like you O God?*

The first 12 verses rejoice in what God has done to rescue them and to destroy their oppressors, and then it looks to God's plans for their future:

Verse 13 says:

*In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed  
In your strength you will guide them to your Holy dwelling....*

and verse 17:

*You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance.*

And this wasn't just hymn singing, the women played their tambourines and there was dancing, this was all out worship!!

And so the journey to the Promised Land began, Moses led them from the Red Sea into the desert of Shur and they travelled for three days under the relentlessly hot sun, and the desert was dry and rocky and lifeless.

And then the words of the worship song didn't match what they were feeling anymore. Thirsty people aren't going to sing in the desert anyway, their lips are cracked and their throats are parched and their voices croaky.

Then someone spots water and everyone's spirits are raised....you could hear the optimists start humming quietly:

*"Sing to the Lord for he is highly exalted, the horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea"*

And the first people to arrive get to the water and....it is bitter, undrinkable. The optimistic minority stop humming and the sound is of muttering and grumbling about death by dehydration..... "so much for the great rescue, is this where it ends?"

We suffered, we suffered more, we got rescued, we started the journey, then we died because there was no water in the desert."

They called the place Marah because Marah means "bitter" ... the water was bitter, and the people were bitter, bitter about God's help, and bitter about Moses' leadership.

*Then Moses cried out to the Lord and the Lord showed him a piece of wood and he threw it into the water and the water became sweet.*

My, that is one of those Bible verses I want MUCH MORE DETAIL about!

Some versions of the Bible talk about "a tree" others about "a piece of wood". There seem to be two possibilities – one that God showed Moses some kind of medicinal shrub which neutralised the water – apparently this is not unknown in Arab culture....or else that the wood was simply a symbol of Moses' obedience to God and the water was made sweet miraculously.

Either way – God helped big time!

Some Bible commentators talk about the wood – or tree – being a signpost to the cross, another piece of wood sometimes described as a tree, which in due course would be a place where bitterness could be taken away, and lives transformed.

And we can try to imagine what it felt like to be the thirsty people of Israel at Marah. Some of us have visited desert-like places....we all know what it is to be thirsty, but only the sort of thirst that 21<sup>st</sup> Century westerners who live with taps know....

Last Sunday was World Water Day, and Tearfund remind us that today, and every day, 5,000 children will die of water borne diseases...and when I looked at the Tearfund website last week there was a picture of a Ugandan teenage girl getting water from a pipe and it said across the photo of her: "Fearfully and wonderfully made"

Underneath it said "Actually I'm just fearful" Fearful of the dangers of walking an hour and a half for dirty water twice a day.

So the big question - Can God really help ? Can God really help that girl and her community? Can he make fresh water flow nearer to her home – well yes if he is God I guess he can, but I'm suspecting he wants to help her through more down to earth means, like the practical work Tearfund are doing; sinking wells, and raising the profile of the one in six people around the world who don't have access to clean water, which some Tearfund supporters were doing at the protests in London yesterday.

But back to us.....what is it that plunges us from rejoicing to complaining? How come we who sing about the God who loves us and cares for us on a Sunday morning, can wonder if he is there, and certainly lack confidence that he can help us, by Monday morning?

Or maybe you know what it is to feel a bit like Moses....you have led others at work in a certain direction, or made a decision which has implications for all your family, and suddenly everything goes pear shaped, perhaps because of the economic situation, and it's your fault.

And of course you can't be blamed for the world's economy any more than Moses could be blamed for bitter water at Marah....but he didn't lash out at the people and remind them of that – he cried out to God, who heard him, and helped.

God made a deal with the Israelites at Marah:

*"If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you."*

It's worth bearing in mind that some of the OT laws that God gave would have very direct health implications....though others are harder for us to see a reason for.

Sometimes our bad health can be a direct result of wrong choices or unhealthy living.... but sometimes we just get sick. Sometimes really fit people have heart attacks, and cheerful people get depressed, and we all get older, and that has issues of its own.

And as we come to God for healing, as we have the chance to do later in this service, he doesn't divide us up into the unfortunate unwell, and the unwise who deserve all they get.

He is the Lord our healer, and we come to him not because any of us deserve his help, but because we know he has helped us in the past, or perhaps we know he has helped a friend who has been healed.

Who's still keeping up with Mark for Lent?

The passage from Mark 9 which Norma read this morning was Tuesday's reading..... and every time I read that passage, I so identify with that Father, who says to Jesus "I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief"

I guess this morning I can take advantage of Josh being the other side of the world (New Zealand now) and talk about him without embarrassing him. Josh is the tallest and fittest of the Senior's. He cycles to work the other side of Tonbridge and spends all day doing physical stuff before cycling home. He's never happier than when climbing, abseiling, hanging from ropes, and doing physical stuff which is totally alien to the rest of the family!

But some of you here will remember him as a 12 year old when he lost the best part of a year of schooling, how he was in and out of hospital for severe abdominal pains which literally floored him, and didn't seem to respond to any pain relief, and despite various unpleasant medical procedures was never diagnosed....

We were relatively new here then, and people were kind, and concerned, and prayed for him and for us all, and some would ask after Josh regularly and week after week the answer was "no better, just the same."

And we all believed that God could help us, and he could heal Josh. Yet for about eighteen months there was no evidence that he had heard those prayers....Lord I believed, but I so much needed help to overcome my unbelief.

After many months Josh's symptoms began to subside – and for a while none of us dared even to voice the fact that maybe, just maybe, our prayers were finally being answered. And in the years since Brian & I have often reflected that it was one of the hardest experiences we have faced, and we didn't stop praying, but we didn't know if God would help us..... we believed but we needed help with our unbelief.

There are lots of accounts in Mark's Gospel of Jesus healing. Peter's mother in law was first, then everyone in Capernaum brought their sick friends and relatives to him. There was the man with leprosy, the paralysed man who was lowered through the roof, the man with the shrivelled hand, the woman with the haemorrhage and the 12 year old daughter of the synagogue ruler.

When Jesus went to Gennesaret people throughout the whole region flocked to him and lined up the sick for him to touch them – and begged that they might just be allowed to touch the edge of Jesus' cloak.

And Jesus wanted some time out. Healing was only a part of his mission, so he went to Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast, busy port cities – pagan cities frequently denounced by Hebrew prophets, so not the place people would expect Jesus to crop up in.... chances are that he went there to be invisible for a while. Yet he was immediately approached by a woman with a demon possessed daughter, and then the friends of a deaf and dumb man.

Back in Galilee he healed the blind man in Bethsaida, before the pivotal point of Mark's Gospel where Jesus was transfigured on the mountain. "Transfiguration", by the way is not a sci-fi term, it was when he appeared in a whole new way to Peter and James and John – he dazzled them because he was so bright, and Moses and Elijah turned up – is it any wonder the three disciples were terrified?

It was the ultimate mountain top spiritual experience, and a cloud enveloped them and God spoke in a voice they all heard.

And it was then, after such an amazing experience that Jesus came down from the mountain to find the other disciples in hot debate with the religious leaders, and with this Father who'd brought his son to the disciples for healing, and it hadn't worked.

And as you read the rest of Mark's gospel you'll see that there are only a couple of other healings mentioned after the transfiguration. It is as if the miracles and the healings were no longer Jesus' priority – he is focussed on the death which awaits him in Jerusalem.

Mark records that he heals the blind man Bartimaeus who shouts at the group leaving Jericho with Jesus, and he heals the High Priest's servant in the garden of Gethsemane after that servant's ear was cut off by someone wielding a sword in darkness and panic.

And that is all – except..... he also healed the boy in chapter 9, whose father, like most of us I would suggest, believed, but wanted help to overcome his unbelief.

You might have come this morning because you are aware of a health issue you want to ask God's healing for. Or you might have come – conscious enough of the issue but unsure you have the faith to come and ask God to help you. So maybe you need to ask for help to overcome that lack of faith – and while you are about it, bring the issue to God. The issue for you might be a health thing – physical or mental. Or perhaps it is an issue like the water of Marah, some bitterness in your life which needs God to make it sweet.

Since January we have followed Moses and his people through the first half of Exodus, and we could sum it up as "the people doubting and questioning and God being faithful", and that maybe sums up life for us all.

Unlike Moses we are able to look to Jesus, who has been this way ahead of us and who sends us his Spirit to help us on the way. God can help us, he promises us his Spirit, and we can ask for that help at any time, in any place, but this morning is a set aside opportunity to be able to do that in the context of our worship together, so come with the faith you have, and ask him to grow that faith, come for whatever help you want to ask him to give you.