

Wellspring from the Rock

A sermon on Exodus 17:1-7 by Nathan Nettleton, 1 October 2023

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Message

There is life and nourishment hidden in the depths, and through Jesus the rock it is accessible to us.

Sermon

There is a style of preaching which was very common among the great Christian preachers of the first few centuries, but which has largely fallen into disrepute these days. The technical term for it is “typological” preaching, and part of the reason it has fallen into disrepute is that it often ignores the surface meaning of the literal text, and instead suggests that everything in the story stands symbolically for something else in a kind of allegory. So the desert stands for sin and the manna from heaven stands for the scriptures and the quail stand for the flesh of Christ, or some such combination, and out of all that we find a meaning for the story we are looking at.

Now I am part of a generation of preachers that were raised poo-pooing such an approach, and there is no doubt that you can find examples of ridiculous extremes of it from some early preachers. But over time I’ve begun to see more merit in some of it. Partly this is because it is a bit hard to escape the fact that many of the apostles and early church leaders preached this way with great effect, and partly too it is because the way Jesus used parables all the time is actually quite a similar thing. But partly too it is because I have increasingly recognised that in many cases it just makes sense.

Today’s first reading – the story of the water coming from the rock in the wilderness – is a case in point. Taken only as a one-off literal event, it has very little to say to us: once upon a time, several thousand years ago, the Israelite people got thirsty and disgruntled in the desert and, on instruction from God, Moses whacked a rock with a stick and fresh water came gushing out and the people lived happily ever after.

So what? Often we evangelicals have done nothing more with such stories than make them some kind of test of faith – do you believe that this miracle literally happened? Well, whether I do or whether I don’t, what difference will it make to my capacity to follow in the ways of Jesus? I’m willing to believe that it happened, but I’m not likely to be part of a thirsty tribe in the desert any time soon, and even if I am, there is no promise here that the same thing would happen again. So what are we to do with it?

Now the typologists can always find something to do with any story, and it is easy to make it sound ridiculous. So in this one, some of them said that the rock stands for Jesus, because of course Jesus is the rock. And then the striking of the rock with the stick stands for Jesus being struck and wounded. And the breaking open of the rock stands for Jesus death, and then the water stands for the Holy Spirit. Now I can easily make that sound rather silly and fanciful, but I reckon it deserves a second look.

If you were arguing, as a few of the typologists did, that these stories only happened and have only been passed on in order to point to Christ, then I agree; that’s ridiculous. That would be as crazy as some fundamentalist telling us that the reason that Collingwood won the Grand Final yesterday was that God was revealing a great and enduring truth to us, to be understood

typologically, that the whole world is against the faithful ones who have a black-and-white view of truth, and that even today they are thrown to the Lions, but that in the end those who hold true to the black-and-white truth will always come out on top. That may make sense to Audrey(!), but the rest of us can see that it was just a football match.

These ancient biblical stories have a meaning of their own, and they have a meaning to the Jewish people who don't read anything of Christ into them. These stories are not simply a mine of symbols that mean something else.

But there is another way to understand what typological readings are trying to say. Rather than saying that this only happened in order to point to something that was to happen later, we can look at these stories and ask whether this story can stand as a symbol of something God often does. Does this story contain a "type" or a "pattern" of the way God works? Because if it does, then understanding that type or pattern is much more likely to have relevance for those of us who are in little danger of being left thirsty in a desert or thrown to the Lions.

And when you ask those kind of questions of this story, I think you will begin to see that the typologists might be onto something.

Bishop Tom Wright begins one of the early chapters of his book, "Simply Christian", with an allegorical story about a place where there used to be lots of natural springs and the people would collect their water from the springs. But occasionally the springs went mad and flooded the town, and occasionally a spring got polluted and someone got sick, so one day the government decided that it would be safer, more efficient, and more controlled and orderly if they concreted over all the natural water sources and created a comprehensive and efficient system of pipes to bring regulated and filtered water to everyone. It all seemed good for a while. Everything was under control and no-one got sick and there were no floods. But then one day, the water underneath built up enough pressure to break through the concrete and surge up through the town and all over the place. Once again there was unregulated water available everywhere, and most of the people were delighted.

Although the story is not a biblical one, as such, Tom Wright reads it typologically to say that human spirituality is a lot like that. A couple of hundred years ago in the Western world, we decided that everything had to be orderly and rational and scientifically explainable, and we concreted over the natural springs of spirituality and dispensed controlled measures of spirituality through the official pipes in the approved places of spirituality for those who still thought they needed it at all. But in our generation, the pressure from below has broken through, and now spirituality is bubbling up all over the place, often in ways which seem a bit polluted or a bit out of control, and certainly in a far less orderly and sanitised way than the official pipes used to dispense it, but actually, the people are delighted. Controlled and measured and sanitised spirituality only ever really pleased those who controlled the pipes, and now the people are delighting in the unruliness of it all.

Now this story from Exodus, this story of the water coming from the rock, is not making exactly the same point, but it is using some similar symbols to make a similar point. And it is by no means far fetched to say that we can recognise a pattern here; that the truths about God and us which are evident in this story continue to be true and evident in many situations, and that we can therefore see things here which hold true for us.

Is it not true that the Israelite people can symbolise us today in our tendency to point the finger at the community leaders as soon as we feel dry and undernourished? And isn't it true that the wellsprings of spiritual nurture are bubbling away underneath us but we are often oblivious to them? And isn't it true that God is always ready to provide more than enough to sustain us, but that often we fail to either expect God to do anything or to ask God to do anything?

I think it might be stretching the typology a bit to make the link that Caesarius of Arles made in the fifth century, which you can hear at Compline on Tuesday night if you are there. Caesarius got into a bit more detail, linking the striking of the rock to the wounding of Christ and the blood and water gushing from his side. And yet, his point is not untrue, is it? Christ is the rock whose wounding becomes a source of life and spiritual hope for us, and that too is part of a pattern of the way God acts.

In our congregational covenant, we commit ourselves to seeking to tune in to the voice of God, and even to expect it in unexpected places, in the insights of the stranger, the outcast, the broken, and the little ones. The water may not come from the expected official sources, but we know that it is part of the way God often works that it will be found, bubbling up from below through the cracks in the official power blocks.

We acknowledge that we are called to nurture faith and growth in ourselves and others, looking for and nourishing the seeds of love and grace, and cultivating the practices of Christian spirituality and discipleship. This story reminds us that even when everything seems hard and dry and inhospitable, those seeds or springs of love and grace are there, perhaps hidden beneath the surface, but ready to break through if we will prayerfully listen for the voice of God and discern which rock God is calling us to knock on and crack open.

To be honest, I don't much care whether or not you believe that the event described in this story literally happened as described or not. The story has not been passed down to us so that you might have an accurate history of the events of the Exodus.

It has been passed down because it tells us the truth about what we are like and about how God operates, over and over again. And it is what is true of us and how we connect with the God who operates like this that will matter tomorrow and the next day. It is that which will be the true measure of our faith and our following of Jesus. And it is to that God that we are called to surrender ourselves, for it is that God who we can trust to hold us, even when we when we cannot hold ourselves in the dry and threatening places.