

IS THE LORD AMONG US OR NOT?
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Lent, 2020
Romans 5:1-8

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, Romans 5:1-8: ¹ **Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,** ² **through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.** ³ **Not only that, but we also glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance,** ⁴ **and perseverance produces character, and character, hope.** ⁵ **Hope does not disappoint us either, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to us.** ⁶ **For, while we were still helpless, at the set time Christ died for ungodly people.** ⁷ **For very rarely will someone die for a righteous person, although someone might perhaps even dare to die for a good person.** ⁸ **However, God shows His own love for us by this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Earlier in today's First Lesson, we heard of the Israelites journeying through the wilderness. They were making their way in stages to Mount Sinai where the LORD would give them His holy Law. We are told that "*They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.*" ² *The people quarrelled with Moses. They said, "Give us water, that we may drink it!"* (Exodus 17:1b-2). Israel had been on the move for several days. The hills were getting higher, the valleys were narrower and full of huge rocks, and springs of water were nowhere to be found. They were hot and tired from walking all day, and it's true: the water supply was uncomfortably low. However, what ensued could only be described as a major temper tantrum. They totally lost it. "...*The people were so thirsty for water that they grumbled against Moses. They asked: "Why have you brought us up here out of Egypt? Was it to kill me, my children and my cattle with thirst?"*" (Exodus 17:3).

At first, they had determined that Moses, their leader, was incompetent. Only a fool would direct them to come to this waterless place, but now they upped the ante: maybe it wasn't his stupidity, maybe Moses was evil. He had deceived them. That was his sinister plan all along – to deliberately lead them out there so he could murder them by thirst. He's wicked and must be destroyed. He ought to be stoned to death. Hearing all their grumbling, and being fearful for his life, "*Moses cried out to the LORD. He asked: "What should I do with this people? They are almost stoning me"*" (Exodus 17:4).

Who would have blamed Moses at this point if he had felt like taking his staff and going back to tend sheep for his father-in-law, who lived nearby! After putting forth his every effort to serve the people, they were ready to turn against him as soon as the first sign of trouble arose. "*What should I do with this people?"* Moses asked the LORD in his dismay. Yet he accepted the LORD's direction to strike a rock, trusting that the LORD would bring water out of that rock. No wonder that he called the place "Massah," which means "testing," and "Meribah," which means "quarrelling," "*because they had tested the LORD, by asking, "Is the LORD among us or not?"*" (Exodus 17:7).

Sometimes, to encourage students and assist in their learning, teachers will say that there is no such thing as a stupid question. Well, that's not really true. The question being asked by the Israelites is proof of this. It is a profoundly stupid question. "*Is the LORD among us or not?"* Only some four weeks ago, these people were still slaves in Egypt. They had witnessed the Lord's mighty hand afflicting their oppressors with ten devastating plagues. The Pharaoh who said he'd never release them ended up begging them to leave. The people of Egypt urged them to hurry.¹ Israel, a nation of slaves, went marching out of Egypt like conquering heroes. It was the Lord's

¹ Exodus 12:31-42

doing - and they all knew it.

Later, however, when the Pharaoh changed his mind, and they were caught between the pursuing chariots and the Red Sea, but the ocean miraculously opened before them, The LORD Himself, in the form of a cloud, came down and positioned Himself between the fleeing Israelites and the Egyptian army. All night long, He gave impenetrable darkness to the charioteers on one side and light to His people on the other. Then at dawn, when they were all safely on the other side, He lifted the cloud and allowed the chariots to move forward, drawing them into His trap.²

They were all drowned as the walls of water fell on them. Yet after witnessing this, the people still had to ask, "*Is the LORD among us or not?*"

That's not all. Even as the Israelites continued their march, that very morning they had stuffed themselves with manna that the LORD had provided for them.³ Ever since the food they had packed in Egypt had run out, they woke to find a white layer of manna lying on the ground. They scooped up baskets of it and had been munching on it all day. If that was not evidence of the Lord's ongoing presence and care, then what was? Obviously, though, the LORD had been leading the way. He had made Himself continuously visible to them by appearing as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He had shaded them from the heat of the sun and given them light by night. Yet they still dared to ask, "*Is the LORD among us or not?*" How foolish could they be? All they needed to do was to open their eyes. He was right there. Of course, He was among them, and yet they doubted.

Maybe, however, we shouldn't be so critical of them, for who among us here today amid a crisis or a seemingly insurmountable problem hasn't wondered the same thing? "*I'm suffering. I'm in need. I'm terribly sad or frightened. I'm desperate. God, where are You?*"

We hear this a lot, especially from the mouths of unbelievers. It's one of the "proofs" they present for their lack of faith. If God is good, then why does He allow bad things to happen? The media too, like to push this same kind of thinking when there is something significant to report within Christian churches. Take, for example, the shocking allegations of paedophilia that has been reported as happening in some Christian churches here in Australia. Of course, such pastors or priests who are guilty of this sort of behaviour are nothing short of monsters who ought to face the full force of the law (as well as God's Law), but unbelieving news reporters love nothing better than to find faithful clergy who are attempting to console victims so they can ask them, "*Where is God in all this?*" They deliver the question with a satisfied sneer, thinking it's the final nail in the coffin of Christianity.

The mistake is mankind's continuing attempt to find God in circumstances. It's to confuse what we see and experience in the fallen world around us with the God against whom the world is in rebellion. For the unbeliever, that evil things happen is proof that there is no God. For believers, that evil things happen is taken as evidence that God has abandoned us, or hates us, or doesn't care about us - something along those lines.

However, what does the Scripture say? A couple week's back, we had as our First Lesson the account of mankind's fall. We heard how our first parents sinned against the LORD God and fled from His presence, but He had called them back to Himself and promised them a Saviour. He covered their shame, but He did say that there would be unpleasant consequences. There would be pain, hardship, futile toil, thorns and thistles, and ultimately death. That there is evil in the world is not evidence that there is no God or that He doesn't care; it's evidence that the world is under God's curse because of mankind's rebellion. It's proof that there is a God and that *He does care* - cares enough to ensure that we don't remain happy and satisfied in our sinful condition because that would lead to our everlasting separation from Him and our eternal damnation.

The parable about the lost son comes to mind.⁴ As long as the wayward son was living off his father's money, he could sin to his heart's content. It was only when the cash had run out and times were hard that he realised how good he had it at home. Upon his return, he discovered just how much his father loved him even despite the hateful way he'd treated his father. So it is with us: the Lord allows evil to come into our lives precisely so that we won't be comfortable in our sin and rebellion. He wants us to return to Him, to seek Him out where He makes His presence known so that there He can embrace us with His forgiveness and love.

For the Israelites in the desert, the Lord appeared as a cloud. He was right there in plain view. Instead of asking,

² Exodus 13-14

³ Exodus 16

⁴ Luke 15:11-24

“Is the LORD among us or not?” they should have been directing their prayers to Him. *“LORD, we’re out of water. Please give us some. Amen.”* That would have been the faithful thing to do. But no; they pitched a hissy fit. They went into full rebellion mode. They planned to kill God’s prophet, and yet, amazingly, despite all this, the LORD in His infinitely forgiving love and mercy gave them water anyway. He had Moses strike the rock, and He let His people drink.

He has done the same for us, as St. Paul tells us: **“For, while we were still helpless, at the set time Christ died for ungodly people ... God shows His own love for us by this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** Understand here what Paul is saying: If you ever have cause to question the Lord’s gracious care for you, if the conditions of your life make you wonder if He’s left you, or stopped loving you, or that He’s forgotten you, or that somehow He’s enjoying seeing you suffer, then you’re not looking at things correctly, but are instead attempting to find God in circumstances rather than where He truly reveals Himself.

Where does He reveal Himself? He reveals Himself and His true thoughts and attitudes toward us in the most unexpected of places: not in a cloud or pillar of fire, but on a cross. There we see mankind’s rebellion against God in all its raving fury, gleefully torturing and murdering the Lord of glory. There we see the Father’s great love and compassion as the Son of God bears the guilt and penalty of our sin. He is the Rock that is stricken with the rod of God’s Law that we may drink the living water and have eternal life, and because we cannot go back to the cross to watch what happened there, He brings the cross and its benefits to us where we can see them. He does it through the ministry of His church. There our God reveals Himself to us in the written and preached Word. There He shows Himself to us in the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion. By these means, He gives us His Holy Spirit, enabling us to believe in what Christ has done for us so that we are able to know for certain that we stand in righteousness before Him. It’s a righteousness not of our doing, but that is imputed to us by faith. It’s the righteousness of Christ, and through it, we have peace with God. **“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,”** Paul writes. He’s not our enemy. He’s on our side. We never have to doubt His love or ongoing care.

Quite the contrary: now we see what the world of unbelievers can’t see. We see that God does not reveal Himself in circumstances; rather that circumstances and in particular those we would call evil, are used by Him to draw people back to where He is found. This is why Paul can go on to say that we **“glory in our tribulations.”** God allows bad things to happen to us for good reasons. Paul goes on to enumerate some of them. First, he says, **“tribulation produces perseverance.”** Muscles that never get exercised become weak and atrophied. The same is true of faith. Strong faith, the kind that perseveres, has to experience hardship to endure through. Perseverance was what the Israelites lacked. The moment they were inconvenienced, they screamed like a child throwing a tantrum. Perseverance would have allowed them to think, *“The Lord has led us here; He must have a plan to take care of us. We’ll just have to wait and see.”*

Paul goes on, **“perseverance produces character.”** He means the kinds of character virtues we admire. People learn to be generous with God’s gifts because they know what it’s like to go without. People learn to comfort those who mourn because they’ve suffered the loss of loved ones themselves. We learn to be kind and compassionate because we’ve had to endure hatred and rejection. We can only learn to forgive by being sinned against. The best qualities we come to possess can only be forged in the fires of adversity.

Finally, Paul says, **“character (produces) hope.”** Here he’s directing us to the promised end of our faith: the day when Christ returns, the dead are raised, and the living changed to possess bodies incorruptible.⁵ Then our Christian characters will be perfected - no longer flawed and deficient as they are now. Our hope is for the day when all the evil and suffering of this world will be history and we shall live as God intended for us in perfect peace, harmony, and righteousness. We long for it because we don’t have it now, but we know we shall. This is our hope - a hope that is nothing to be ashamed of. When the world around us tells us that it’s a pie in the sky dream, we know better. We’ve seen what the Father has done for us in Christ. We’ve experienced the joy of His divine love. We know what He is doing now, and we know what He has promised. Therefore when trouble comes, we don’t need to ask, *“Is the LORD among us or not?”* because we know that in any and every circumstance, He is leading us by His Word and Spirit to His eternal Promised Land, and He who began us on this journey will certainly bring us to its

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15ff

completion through our Saviour. In His holy name. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Lord God, heavenly Father, limitless in love, and perfect in power, receive our worship and praise. Our eyes always turn to You, for without You there is no help, and with You there is no danger. Be the guardian and defender of all who lift up their hearts to You, of all who seek Your help in times of need.

We confess that we fully deserve Your wrath for breaking Your holy commandments. Therefore we thank You for Your great love in Jesus, who in His compassion and grace sacrificed Himself for our sins. With grateful hearts we praise You for His finished work: His holy life, His blessed example, His gracious teaching, His loving companionship, and His atoning death, and the place in Your kingdom that He has won for us.

Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may follow the example of Jesus, and walk in love. Grant that, as Your children, we may continue to repent of our sins, give up the ways of darkness and error, and walk in paths that are good, righteous, and true. Fill our lives with holiness, with love of Your Word, and with every grace and virtue.

Prosper and protect the work of Your Church. Give success to all who proclaim the glorious Gospel of salvation. Give conviction and faithfulness to all Your people, that they may work with zeal to gather in the harvest of Christ's redeemed people. Bless the ministry of the AELC and the ULMA, that we may continue to spread Your Word unhindered.

Rule and direct our government. Give wisdom and integrity to all in our police and armed forces, that our nation may be kept in peace, and that righteousness and justice may hold sway everywhere.

We pray for all in any need of body or soul, for all loved ones in distant places, for all who have strayed from Your truth, for all who are in temptation, for all who are suffering sickness and pain, and for all who mourn. Bless and help them according to their need. Hear their prayers. Comfort them with Your presence.

Please give to us weather that is appropriate to our needs, that the earth may produce for us in abundance.

Unite in one spirit through the truth all in Your Church on earth, and finally bring us to Your joys in heaven. We pray for these things in the name of Your Son Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Exodus 17:1-7

¹ The whole assembly of the Israelites broke camp from the Wilderness of Sin to travel by stages, as the LORD directed. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarrelled with Moses. They said, "Give us water, that we may drink it!"

Moses asked them, "Why are you quarrelling with me? Why are you testing the LORD?"

³ There the people were so thirsty for water that they grumbled against Moses. They asked: "Why have you brought us up here out of Egypt? Was it to kill me, my children and my cattle with thirst?"

⁴ Moses cried out to the LORD. He asked: "What should I do with this people? They are almost stoning me."

⁵ The LORD told Moses: "Go in front of the people and walk past them! Take with you some of the elders of Israel! Take also in your hand your staff, with which you struck the Nile, and go! ⁶ Look! I shall stand before you there on the rock at Horeb.

Strike the rock! Water will come out of it, and the people will drink it."

Moses did this while the elders of Israel were watching him. ⁷ Moses named the place "Massah" and "Meribah," because the Israelites had quarrelled and because they had tested the LORD, by asking, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Romans 5:1-8

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only that, but we also glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, ⁴ and perseverance produces character, and character, hope. ⁵ Hope does not disappoint us either, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to us. ⁶ For, while we were still helpless, at the set time Christ died for ungodly people. ⁷ For very rarely will someone die for a righteous person, although

someone might perhaps even dare to die for a good person.⁸ However, God shows His own love for us by this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

John 4:5-26

⁵ He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the piece of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.⁶ Jacob's Well was there. Jesus, tired from His journey, simply sat down at the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus asked her, "Give Me a drink!"

⁸ For His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.⁹ The Samaritan woman asked Him: "How is it that You, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans).

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is who is saying to you, 'Give Me a drink!' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

¹¹ The woman said, "Sir, You have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. From where, then, do You get this living water?"¹² Surely You are not greater than Jacob, our ancestor, who gave us the well and used to drink from it himself, as did also his sons and his animals?"

¹³ Jesus answered her, "Everyone who drinks this water will become thirsty again.¹⁴ However, whoever drinks the water that I shall give him will never become thirsty. However, the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up to eternal life."

¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not get thirsty or keep coming out here to draw water!"

¹⁶ Jesus told her, "Go, call your husband and come back here!"

¹⁷ The woman answered Him, "I do not have a husband."

Jesus told her, "You were right when you said, 'I do not have a husband.'¹⁸ For you have had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband. What you have just said is true."

¹⁹ The woman said to Him, "Sir, I see that You are a prophet!²⁰ Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews say, 'The place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.'"

²¹ Jesus told her, "Believe Me, woman, the time is coming when you will not be worshipping the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem.²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We

Jews worship what we know. For salvation comes from the Jews.²³ However, the time is coming and is now here, when the genuine worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. For the Father is looking for such people to worship Him.²⁴ God is a spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth."

²⁵ The woman said to Him, "I know that the Messiah" (who is called 'the Christ') "is coming. When He comes, He will tell us everything."

²⁶ Jesus told her, "I, the One speaking to you, am He."