

LENT III

March 27, 2011

Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

I suppose that every nation on earth has a story that relates to the mythological details of its foundation. Schoolbooks of French history used to begin with the evocative words: "Our ancestors, the Gauls." The mythology relating to the foundation of the United States tells of the Founding Fathers and the resounding words, "We the People." Such stories often evoke a state of initial innocence that the present day has somehow lost. A nation defines its most important characteristics by means of these mythologies. They are a useful tool when rallying the people in times of war, or when affirming their identity and fostering their cultural life in times of peace.

The books of Genesis and Exodus tell a very powerful story of this kind that relates to the foundation and the early days of the nation of Israel. One of the most important myths in those books concerns the forty formative years that the Israelites spent in a barren wilderness situated between Egypt and Palestine. The wilderness was an ambivalent place for the people of the Ancient Near East. It was a sort of no-man's land into which the protection of a monarch did not extend. Both demons and the souls of the departed were said to haunt its wastes. And yet the wilderness was also a place of potential blessing. The gods manifested themselves through its stark purity. Anyone spending the night in the wilderness under its vast and starry sky may well encounter one of their number.

It is precisely because of this ambiguity about the wilderness that the Bible seems to take two views of the time that the Israelites spent in it. Some biblical authors look back on it as a time of real purity and innocence. Before the Law was given on Mount Sinai, God looked on the people with indulgence. They were like children before a Bar Mitzvah; they were not yet obliged to keep the law, because the law had not yet been given. Bar Mitzvah in fact means "Son of the Commandments", i.e. someone who is now obliged to live according to the precepts of the law. Other Biblical authors look upon the wilderness period as the time in which all the foundations of Israel's later woes were laid. For them, the wilderness was a place of death and

uncleanliness: the place to which the scapegoat was driven after the sins of the community were placed on its head.

Two versions of some of these wilderness stories exist in the Bible. There are two versions of today's reading from the Book of Exodus. In Exodus, the people are moaning that there is no water. Moses intercedes to God on their behalf, and lo and behold, water appears as an answer to their prayers. In Numbers 20:1-13, this story is told from a different angle. The people's rebellion against Moses is stressed. The wilderness is a place of where innocence is lost. The people refuse to trust God; they even put God to the test. In the first example, the desert is a place of innocence and purity – it is a place God tests the people's trust. In the second, the desert is a place of rebellion and woe – it is a place where the people put God to the test.

Sometimes it is very hard to know where to put our prayers on this scale. Are our prayers a form of bribery, or are they expressions of trust in God? I've heard people pray: "God, if you heal this person, I promise I will go to church and be a better person." Or even, "God, if you don't heal this person, I will know you don't exist." God's power to heal and to transform our lives is not based on whether or not we believe that he can do it. God is not moved to action by our feeble promises or threats. God acts in his own sovereign time, and all we need to do is to trust. Many of the Israelites did not learn that lesson in the wilderness. They thought that they could manipulate God according to their will. They did not understand that God wanted their love and their trust. Many of them seem to have been following Moses only because they had been promised something at the end of their time in the desert. If we do not trust God in the desert, how can we trust him when we reach the Promised Land?

Finally, Paul has told us that Christ died for us when we were still God's enemies: how much more will he do for us now that we have become his friends? Since we have become God's friends, more is expected of us now that we are God's own than was expected from us in our days of ignorance. We are no longer the children of the Commandments; we are the children of God's grace.

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