

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)
16th October 2022

Once again, our First Reading provides us with this very graphic visual image. There is Moses, high up on the hilltop, trying to keep his arms raised high, holding in them the staff of God. But Moses is not strong enough, and from time to time his arms begin to sink; and when they begin to sink, the battle on the plain far below turns against Israel, and it starts to look as if Amalek might destroy them. The arms, and the staff they bear, must remain high up on the hilltop, the silhouette of the man, the arms and the staff clearly visible to the men on the plain below. That is why Aaron and Hur are holding up the arms of Moses, and the arms of Moses are holding up the staff of God.

It is a striking image, the silhouette of a man on a hill with his arms outstretched, but what a weight of meaning it carries. The staff that Moses is holding is one of the most precious things the Israelites possess. It began life, years before, as a simple shepherd's staff, for guiding and defending sheep. Moses was out one day, caring for the sheep of his father-in-law, carrying a shepherd's stick, when he sees a burning bush. Curious, he approaches to investigate, and there he meets with God. God calls Moses to go back to Egypt and set his people free. Moses is uncertain: why would the people believe he has been called by God, how can he prove he really is chosen to lead them to freedom? God asks Moses what he is carrying: a shepherd's staff. 'Fling it on the ground' God says, and as Moses does so it becomes a snake – Moses runs away. What is he running from? From the snake? From God? From his destiny? From all the problems and the trials and the pain that he can see will come his way if he follows this call? Perhaps all of these. Now, says God, pick up the snake by its tail. This is a real test. Moses, if you want to go back and convince the people, you first need to show that you, yourself, really trust God and believe what he says: so you must pick up this snake in the most dangerous way of all, the way that leaves it free to turn and bite you. Moses does trust, does pick up the snake, and it is a staff once more.

And so, this staff becomes a sort of symbol of God's power and his fidelity. It is wielded again and again throughout the story of the exodus, sometimes by Moses, sometimes by his brother Aaron. Aaron transforms it into a serpent, and when the magicians of Pharaoh do the same, Aaron's serpent eats all of theirs. Aaron uses it to turn the Nile blood red, and it is wielded again and again in the plagues of Egypt. Moses holds the staff over the Red Sea as Israel escapes, pursued by the angry Egyptians, and the sea parts. When the people of Israel are thirsty in the desert, so thirsty that they think they will die and they complain against God, Moses strikes a rock with the staff and water pours out. And then, with the staff perhaps still damp from this encounter, the Amalekites appear and once again the nation is in mortal peril. This staff that Moses holds up high is no mere walking stick, or badge of office, and it is certainly not some sort of magic wand: it is the symbol of God's protective presence with his people. It carries a great weight of history, a great weight of meaning. It has been part of all that has happened from the call of Moses to this day of battle; it carries on it the memories of slavery, of liberation, of enemies defeated and of burning thirst slaked; it embodies the story of God's tender love for his people.

And so to the battle at Rephidim. High up on the hill is a familiar figure, sat upon a stone with his hands held high, and in those hands they can see the silhouette of a staff that is so much more than a staff. It is a staff that tells a story: a story of a man whose destiny is chosen and set out by God, an ordinary man chosen for extraordinary things; a story of a people chosen, a people loved and set free, a people rescued time and again, a people brought through the Red Sea, a people watered in the desert. It tells the story of all that God has done for them. And as the soldiers struggling with a powerful enemy on the plain below see this staff, lifted up high above them, they remember all that God has done for them and this puts new spirit in them, and they fight all the harder, and the battle turns their way. But if the staff sinks they forget all that God has done, and they begin to falter: is the fight really worthwhile? And the battle goes against them.

Moses and his staff, silhouetted on the hilltop. This figure is like a protective shield over the Israelite army; they cannot forget all that God has done, and this gives them the courage to fight on. And if, for us, it calls to mind another man with arms outstretched on another hill, with another, crueller, wooden beam, then that is as it should be. When the battle for virtue, goodness, fidelity is hard for us; when the army of temptation, indifference, worldliness, seems to be almost on the verge of overpowering us, we should remember Rephidim, remember Moses lifting his staff high, and we should look to the hilltop. Remember what God has done for you: the gift of his Son, his adoption of you at Baptism, his gifts of grace, the touch of his love in the Eucharist, this family that he has called you to belong among, and all the very specific ways in which he has chosen, blessed and nurtured you. It is this knowledge of all that we have received, like the knowledge of all that Israel had received as they looked at Moses and his staff, that keeps us faithful.