

Homily – Sunday 9th September 2018 – 6 pm

Sometimes, when I look at the readings, I feel my heart sink rather. And this evening is one of those occasions. Don't get me wrong, the parting of the Red Sea is a great story – it's perhaps one we would choose to tell children because it is vivid and easy to imagine. But I can't help but feel uneasy about a story which presents God saving one group of people and massacring another. Let me be quite clear: that is not the God I worship.

And so, in good priestly style, I hoped that I might be able to conveniently ignore the Old Testament reading and focus on the New. Except that even here I find myself uneasy. The word "reward" appears 7 times in this passage, and I find the notion of reward problematic in the context of our faith. Life teaches us that faith certainly does not immunise us from tragedy and challenge. Do we really get our just desserts in life? I rather think not.

The thing is, for all their challenges, and for all the questions that they raise, I'm not quite ready to simply dismiss the scriptures. Even I know that I have to do better than that.

For the Israelites in the wilderness, keeping faith was a difficult business. It was all too easy to believe that God had abandoned them. At times they were ready to throw in the towel. And so finding signs of God's presence was important. Remembering to be thankful, to recognise that they had not been abandoned. Discovering in the end that the experience of wilderness, far from being abandonment, enabled them to recognise that God could not be confined to the Temple, but rather could be found in the most unlikely of places. That far from God abandoning God's people, much more likely was that the people would abandon God. So encouraging one another to keep faith was important.

And in a sense the Lord's Prayer is also about keeping faith. Jesus clearly felt it was important to remind people not to make a show of their devotions – not least because that kind of devotion is designed to play to an audience, not to connect with God. And so he taught them a very simply way to connect. A prayer that contains the essence of our faith and invites us to spend time in conversation with God.

Keeping faith is no easier today than it has ever been. In our own lives we may recognise times that have felt like wilderness; when God has felt very far away. And there is no guarantee against hardship and tragedy – both can happen indiscriminately.

But we are never abandoned by God. Through our triumphs, successes and celebrations, as well as hardship and tragedy, God remains by our side, loving us and longing us to know that love. And the Lord's prayer is one way in which we can remind ourselves to connect with that loving presence. It is no guarantee of reward in any earthly sense – of wealth, even of health. But knowing God and feeling known by God is deeper than that. The closer we come, the more glimpses we get of the world as seen through God's eyes. Of the world through the eyes of the creator who loves what has been created. To glimpse that kind of love transforms our lives and opens our hearts to life in all its fullness.

Amen