

Psalm 78, 1-39

1. *Hear my teaching, O my people; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.*
2. *I will open my mouth in a parable; I will pour forth mysteries from of old,*
3. *Such as we have heard and known, which our forebears have told us,*
4. *We will not hide from their children, but will recount to generations to come, the praises of the Lord and his power and the wonderful works he has done.*
5. *He laid a solemn charge on Jacob and made it a law in Israel, which he commanded them to teach their children,*
6. *That the generations to come might know, and the children yet unborn, that they in turn might tell it to their children.*
7. *So that they might put their trust in God and not forget the deeds of God, but keep his commandments,*
8. *And not be like their forebears, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, and whose spirit was not faithful to God.*
9. *The people of Ephraim, armed with the bow, turned back in the day of battle;*
10. *They did not keep the covenant of God and refused to walk in his law;*
11. *They forgot what he had done and the wonders he had shown them.*
12. *For he did marvellous things in the sight of their forebears, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan.*
13. *He divided the sea and let them pass through; he made the waters stand still in a heap.*
14. *He led them with a cloud by day and all the night through with a blaze of fire.*
15. *He split the hard rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink as from the great deep.*
16. *He brought streams out of the rock and made water gush out like rivers.*
17. *Yet for all this they sinned yet more against him and defied the Most High in the wilderness.*
18. *They tested God in their hearts and demanded food for their craving.*
19. *They spoke against God and said, 'Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?'*

20. *'He struck the rock indeed, so that the waters gushed out and the streams overflowed, but can he give bread or provide meat for his people?'*
21. *When the Lord heard this, he was full of wrath; a fire was kindled against Jacob and his anger went out against Israel.*
22. *For they had no faith in God and put no trust in his saving help.*
23. *So he commanded the clouds above and opened the doors of heaven.*
24. *He rained down upon them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven.*
25. *So mortals ate the bread of angels; he sent them food in plenty.*
26. *He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens and led out the south wind by his might.*
27. *He rained flesh upon them as thick as dust and winged fowl like the sand of the sea.*
28. *He let it fall in the midst of their camp and round about their tents.*
29. *So they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they desired.*
30. *But they did not stop their craving; their food was still in their mouths,*
31. *When the anger of God rose against them, and slew their strongest men and felled the flower of Israel.*
32. *But for all this, they sinned yet more and put no faith in his wonderful works.*
33. *So he brought their days to an end like a breath and their years in sudden terror.*
34. *Whenever he slew them, they would seek him; they would repent and earnestly search for God.*
35. *They remembered that God was their rock and the Most High God their redeemer.*
36. *Yet they did but flatter him with their mouth and dissembled with their tongue.*
37. *Their heart was not steadfast towards him, neither were they faithful to his covenant.*
38. *But he was so merciful that he forgave their misdeeds and did not destroy them; many a time he turned back his wrath and did not suffer his whole displeasure to be roused.*
39. *For he remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes by and does not return.*

Refrain

We will tell the glorious deeds of the Lord,
the wonders he has done.

Psalm 78 is a marvellous psalm, because it traces the history of Israel and the people's relationship with God and their disobedience. It is a long psalm, so I shall divide it into two parts, vv.1-39 and vv.40-72.

The first part begins like a wisdom psalm with a wisdom teacher, who raises a problem concerning Israel's history. (v.1, 'Hear my teaching, O my people, incline your ears to the words of my mouth.' Then, vv.2,3, 'I will open my mouth in a parable; I will pour forth mysteries from of old, such as we have heard and known, which our forebears have told us.')

The psalmist's intention becomes clear in v.4, 'We will not hide from their children, but will recount to generations to come, the praises of the Lord and his power and the wonderful works he has done.'

The tradition is passed down from one generation to the next. It is about God and also the means of educating the nation. (vv.5,6, 'He laid a solemn charge on Jacob and made it a law in Israel, which he commanded them to teach their children, that the generations to come might know, and the children yet unborn, that they in turn might tell it to their children.')

This is in order that they might trust in God, not forget what he has done and might obey his commandments, unlike their forebears, who are described as stubborn, rebellious and not steadfast. (vv. 7,8)

The next section, (vv.9-16) is concerned with God's saving acts. It begins by criticising the Israelites for failing to keep the law and the covenant and for forgetting what God had done. (v.10, 'They did not keep the covenant of God and refused to walk in his law,' and v.11, 'They forgot what he had done and the wonders he had shown them.')

So, they had to be reminded! v.12 reminds them of the plagues sent while they were in Egypt, 'For he did marvellous things in the sight of their forebears, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan.' Then comes the miracle at the Red Sea at the Exodus. (v.13, 'He divided the sea and let them pass through; he made the waters stand still in a heap.')

Then they are to be reminded of the pillar of cloud and fire. God went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. (v.14, 'He led them with a cloud by day and all the night through with a blaze of fire.')

The pillar of cloud represents the presence of God, and can be seen at the baptism of Jesus and also at the Transfiguration, when God speaks out of the cloud.

Then, in vv.15-29, in response to the people's complaints, God told Moses to strike the rock, so that water gushed out, and then sent manna and quails for food. (v.20, 'He struck the rock indeed, so that the waters gushed out and the streams overflowed.' v.24, 'He rained down upon them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven.' And v.27, 'He rained flesh upon them thick as dust and winged fowl like the sand of the sea.')

In spite of all this, Israel remained unfaithful and were not steadfast, nor did they remain faithful to the covenant. Yet, God, being merciful, forgave them. (v.38, 'But he was so merciful that he forgave their misdeeds and did not destroy them.')

In accordance with the character of God, he forgave them many times. (v.38, 'Many a time he turned back his wrath, and did not suffer his whole displeasure to be roused.')

This part of Psalm 78 tells, then, like the book of Exodus, of the early history of Israel from their release from slavery in Egypt and the wilderness wandering before the conquest of

Canaan, but it is a story, rather than a historical account, which is intended to show the character of God, his relationship with his people and their failure to abide by the covenant and obey the law.

We value our history as a country, as we feel that we need to learn lessons from it. We pass it on to future generations in history lessons in school and sometimes privately, in order to try to instil values.

Prayer

God our creator,
you feed your children with the true manna,
the living bread from heaven:
let this holy food sustain us through our earthly pilgrimage
until we come to that place
where hunger and thirst are no more;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

(Post Communion Collect, Trinity 13)