

# **Year A**

## **Exodus 17:1-7**

Tradition claims that Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built over the cave in which Christ is said to have been buried. In July 2002 the church became the scene of ugly fighting between the monks who run it. The conflict began when a Coptic monk sitting on the rooftop decided to move his chair into the shade. This took him into the part of the rooftop courtyard looked after by the Ethiopian monks.

It turns out that the Ethiopian and Coptic monks have been arguing over the rooftop of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for centuries. In 1752 the Ottoman Sultan issued an edict declaring which parts of the Church belong to each of six Christian groups: the Latin, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Copts, and Ethiopians. Despite the edict conflict over the church remains.

The rooftop had been controlled by the Ethiopians, but they lost control to the Copts when hit by a disease epidemic in the 19th century. Then in 1970 the Ethiopians

regained control when the Coptic monks were absent for a short period. They have been squatting there ever since, with at least one Ethiopian monk always remaining on the roof to assert their rights. In response a Coptic monk has been living on the roof also, to maintain the claim of the Copts.

And so we get to a Monday in July 2002, when the Coptic monk moves his chair into the shade. Harsh words led to pushes, then shoves, until an all out brawl is going, including the throwing of chairs and iron bars. At the end of the fight 11 of the monks were injured, including one monk

unconscious in hospital and another with a broken arm.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we may despair when we think of where the church has got itself. The Scripture tells us that God is love and we know therefore that the church brought into being as the body of Christ on earth is to reflect the love of God. We are to be like a mirror reflecting the love of Christ out into the world. So what has gone wrong? Where has all this quarrelling and testing come from? Maybe the analogy of the mirror is to work another way. Maybe during the season

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<sup>1</sup> Reuters, Monday July 29, 2002

of Lent in particular, we find the mirror being brought before us so we can take a good long look at ourselves. What do we see when we gaze into it? Does it please us or does it cause us to drop our gaze to the ground in shame?

In the middle of our principal Old Testament text today Moses asked the question of God; 'what shall I do with this people?' In other words, 'what is the matter with these people?' 'Why are they so useless, God?' I wonder, if any church minister, in exasperation, has ever complained to God about the people he or she has been called to

serve? It is true that ministers can sometimes lose heart and become disillusioned, after all. But we have to acknowledge, that before Moses complained to God about the people, the people were complaining about Moses. ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt to land us in the desert without any water? What kind of leader are you, anyway?’ We have here a general atmosphere of testing and complaint and nobody is safe from the gunfire.

I have for you the perfect story: “There was a perfect man who met a perfect woman. After a perfect courtship, they had a perfect

wedding. Their life together was, of course, perfect. One snowy, stormy Christmas Eve this perfect couple was driving along a winding road when they noticed someone at the roadside in distress. Being the perfect couple, they stopped to help. There stood Santa Claus with a huge bundle of toys. Not wanting to disappoint any children on the eve of Christmas, the perfect couple loaded Santa and his toys into their vehicle. Soon they were driving along delivering the toys. Unfortunately, the driving conditions deteriorated and the perfect couple and Santa Claus had an accident. Only one of

them survived the accident. Who was the survivor? The answer: The perfect woman. She was the only one that really existed in the first place. Everyone knows there is no such person as Santa Claus and there is no such thing as a perfect man. A Male's Response: So, if there is no perfect man and no Santa Claus, the perfect woman must have been driving. That explains why there was a car accident. And so on.....

What a mess we find ourselves in, in this world which is full of testing and quarrelling! So how do we make sense of it all and how do we get on from the problems to find a way



forward. Well, I think there are two elements in the Exodus' story that we mustn't miss. First, Moses didn't have to look very far to find the answer to his problems. The answer in fact was standing in his own shoes! When we pray to God with our problems which seemingly are impossible to solve the answer so often returns in the form of a big finger pointing back at ourselves. If Moses hoped that God was going to provide other folks or even an army of angels to bale him out then he had to think again. Moses had everything he needed in himself because God had enabled him for the task already. Where's

your staff? Lift it up and strike the rock because I am with you and everything is possible for me.

Second, no-one is ever stuck on their own in God's plans. Jesus has done the solitary work so that we don't have to go there ourselves. What did God say to Moses? 'Take some of the elders of Israel with you and go.' A problem shared really is a problem halved.

The old saying 'a problem shared is a problem halved' may have been based on scientific fact, according to a new study

published in *The Daily Mail*. The article goes as follows:

“Researchers from California have proved that the best way to beat stress is to share your feelings - and sharing with someone in the same situation yields the best results.

This is because sharing a threatening situation with a person in a similar emotional state 'buffers individuals from experiencing the heightened levels of stress that typically accompany threat'.

A study from the University of Hawaii claimed stress can be as contagious as the common cold and you can actually 'catch' other people's anxieties.

It found that if you are sitting next to a moaning colleague who goes into meltdown about the slightest thing, or spends the day whining, it could give you 'second-hand stress'.

Psychologist Professor Elaine Hatfield said 'passive' or second-hand stress can quickly spread around the workplace.

A total of 52 female undergraduates were paired up and asked to make a speech while being taped by researchers from the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business.

Prior to each speech, participants were encouraged to discuss how they felt about public speaking with the researchers, and their fellow participants. Other participants were told not to discuss their feelings.

Levels of the stress hormone cortisol were measured before, during and after each participants speech.

The researchers found that stress levels were significantly reduced when the participants were able to vocalise how they felt about the speeches.

This was most noticeable when the discussion was had with a fellow participant, in which they shared a common fear.

Lead researcher Professor Sarah Townsend believes sharing experiences could help people deal with stress in the workplace. She claims that talking with a colleague who shares the same emotional state will lighten

the load, decrease stress and help improve productivity.

'For instance, when you're putting together an important presentation or working on a high-stakes project, these are situations that can be threatening and you may experience heightened stress.

'But talking with a colleague who shares your emotional state can help decrease this stress.'

'Imagine you are one of two people working on an important project: if you have a lot riding on this project, it is a potentially

stressful situation,' added Professor Townsend.

'But having a coworker with a similar emotional profile can help reduce your experience of stress.'

It is hoped the research may help people from different cultural backgrounds communicate better in the workplace.

The findings were published in the journal Social Psychological and Personality Science.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2548917/A-problem-shared-really-IS-problem-halved-Study-finds-discussing-problems-people-situation-reduces-stress-levels.html>



Moses took the elders with him and together they tackled the problem. Leadership in the Christian church must always be corporate. Any attempt by an individual to take a sole lead will always result in a misplaced authority. The people blamed Moses when they had no business to do so. The Exodus was a collective enterprise. They were all in it together and so any solutions to the subsequent problems that they faced could only be answered when they remained together. This Lent we are reminded that we have all that we need. God does supply our daily needs and if we stay close together we

will always find a way forward. Quarrelling and testing are not new. They are products of our fallenness that we can not easily shake off but we must never give in to despair.