

Living water from an ancient source

Once upon a time, in the Ancient Near East, gods were like corner shops: there were plenty of them and they were local. One god would be associated with a particular mountain, another tied in with agriculture on the plain. You worshipped your local gods: if you moved, you wouldn't keep going back to your old corner shop: you'd switch to the god of the place you'd moved to.

But then gods got bigger – more like supermarkets. Particular gods became associated with specific peoples and nations. The question of loyalty arose: even if you moved, you might decide to stick with the god of your fathers. On the other hand, if another god appeared to bring the promise of better harvests, or military success, you might think about switching.

All this was true, at one time, for ancient Israel. The God they'd got to know in their journey out of Egypt called for loyalty over and against the gods of the peoples in and around the land in which they settled. There was something distinctive about him from the start, because he prohibited the making of any image, unlike deities represented by carvings of animals or birds or in the likeness of human beings. But with new possibilities in the promised land, and all the alternatives on offer, Israel started shopping around. Only gradually did they come to see their God as the one true God and the others as a sham.

This polytheistic world with its idols of wood and stone seems far removed from our time. Yet our culture, too, presents us with many false gods to choose from. Consumerism, security, success, money, work, drugs, excess: these and many more seek our worship, our loyalty, investment of our resources; and may even appear to offer us salvation – from fear, boredom, reality, disapproval – whatever. So when we hear God through Jeremiah calling his people back to him, we may also hear him recalling us.

My people have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, that can hold no water [KJB].

Isn't that what we're always doing? Preferring our own contrived remedies to the truly life-giving approach which is open to us?

We do it as our personalities evolve:

the person who always seeks self-protection, when they really need to learn to trust;
the person who tries to earn love, who just needs to discover that they are already loved;
the person who is never satisfied, who really needs to learn to appreciate what they have.

We do it because we're afraid of change, or of missing out, or because there is just so much on offer – and we haven't tried all the options yet.

We even do it in our religious lives, when sometimes the things which are meant to help us become ways of keeping the living God at bay. The God who would lead us *where streams of living water flow*.

In that hymn and psalm, the divine shepherd also leads us through *death's dark vale*. Before Israel arrived in a plentiful country, full of fruit and temptation, they journeyed *through a land of deserts and of pits, of drought and of the shadow of death*. It was in the desert that Israel got to know God.

I'm well aware that I was a child of older parents: they were shaped by the experience of wartime and post-war austerity in a way that my contemporaries' younger parents weren't. Were there things learnt in the desert years of the mid-20th century that we'd have been better holding on to in the 1960s and beyond? The current ecological crisis, for one, fuelled by excess, disposables and novelty, suggests there are. There's a world of difference between make do and mend and fast fashion.

What about in our own lives? Are there things we have learnt, not least about God, in our difficult times, our wilderness years? For some, of course, such times cause a loss of faith; but others gain depth. We might not have realised it at the time: then we were just trying to get through. But emerging on the other side, as in the popular Footprints story, we perhaps discover the God who accompanied, reshaped or resourced us.

Certainly testing times can reveal the cracked cisterns in our lives: those sources, of our own making or not, which fail in time of need. Such times have the power to shatter our illusions – including our false images of God. The idea that he's there for our benefit, for instance.

Because we do have images of God: not in wood or stone, but in our heads. And despite the prohibition in the commandments and the iconoclasm of the reformers, Christians possess a definitive image of God in Jesus Christ. In the words of the letter to the Colossians, *Christ is the image of the invisible God*. Christ thirsting on the cross, with us and for us; and Christ the source of living water, welling up to eternal life.