

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2026 – i.e. Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 17:1-7

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As many of you know, Lydia, my wife, used to work in outdoor education. One of her jobs was taking groups of teenagers out into the National Parks on hiking trips. Some of these kids had never been out of the city before, and it was Lydia's job to guide them, to bring them back safely, and hopefully to help them learn something along the way.

In that context she used a learning tool. I can't remember what she called it, but I think of it as a traffic-light system – Red, Amber, Green. A “Green” situation is a comfortable environment: there are no real stresses; you are familiar with what's going on around you; you understand your task, and you feel fully capable of doing it. A “Green” situation is a walk in the park, perhaps literally. A “Red” situation is the complete opposite: you feel out of control; you lack the knowledge you need even to begin your task; and the challenges you face are either too difficult, or there are too many of them, to manage at the same time. I know about this scale because Lydia has used it with me before; if you ask me nicely sometime I'll tell you about a New Year's Day hike we did one year in the Smoky Mountains...

The traffic-light scale is subjective, of course: two people might experience the same activity as a different colour. Another interesting thing about this tool is that it applies to every task and every person: every one of us is at every moment seeing the world through shades of green, amber and red.

I described the traffic-light system as a learning tool. A “Green” situation feels comfortable, but it's not a good place to learn: the lack of stress or surprise means that you relax into old habits; you're just going through the motions really. A “Red” situation is also as bad a learning environment, but for different reasons. You're in survival mode; you may find yourself in the same situation again someday, but the chances are the only thing you'll remember is the sense of panic. If you want to learn well, or create a good learning environment for other people, you need to find that “Amber” zone: that happy medium where you have enough stimulation to keep you on your toes, but not so much that you feel overwhelmed. What that looks like will be slightly different for each person; and

maybe the same activity will feel different as you grow, or as your life circumstances change.

As I've said, we are all somewhere on that scale, all the time. Both teachers and students are on that scale together: we are all learners, at least potentially. If it feels like I'm not learning much where I am, that raises some interesting questions. Is it because I am avoiding complex or stressful tasks? Is it that I'm so overwhelmed in some parts of my life that I deliberately seek comfort and security in others? How might I change my approach to a particular task, so that I become free to learn?

Our English word “disciple”, and the equivalent in Greek (*mathetes*), means “student”. The Christian disciple is someone committed to learning and growing. And all of this stuff about traffic-lights has applications to our Christian discipleship.

We see some of that coming out in our Bible readings today. In our reading from Exodus Moses is – if you like – leading the ultimate backpacking trip into the wilderness. He encounters a pretty fundamental problem – the lack of drinkable water – and a task that was already on the edge between Amber and Red tips over the edge. So most of that reading is people deperately complaining: the people complaining to Moses; Moses responding in kind; and finally Moses complaining to the Lord. It doesn't feel like a learning environment; it feels like a battle for survival.

Our Gospel reading has the same image in it – somebody wants a drink – but the emotional tone is very different. I don't get a strong sense of desperation from Jesus or the Samaritan woman. We are pretty comfortably in the Green zone. The only hint of tension in the story is that the encounter is taking place at midday, a time when nobody would really want to be outside for too long if they could help it. On that basis some scholars say that the woman was an outcast, but that feels like a stretch. The conversation between Jesus and this woman feels leisurely; it's almost like they're both indulging the desire for company.

On the face of it, neither of these readings describes a good learning environment: one of them is too risky; one of them is too comfortable. But there is a force at work that changes these situations into something more productive. I call that force “grace”. To describe the work of grace in the terms that I've been using: grace is all about creating an “Amber” zone. Grace is what draws people out of a struggle for survival, or out of laxity and comfort, and into a place of learning and growth. The moment where I see grace at work in our Exodus reading is when Moses finally turns to the Lord, and prays for help. Out of that moment of grace comes the answer to prayer: God reminds him that he has been in desperate situations before, and came out of it with tools he could use. Of course, the

staff with which he struck the Nile [17:5] isn't really the tool that matters: it's prayer; it's reliance on God that he needs. And so he and his community learn something; they put down useful memories.

The agent of grace in our Gospel reading is of course Jesus Christ himself. Despite the leisurely pace of the conversation, it has an edge. At each point where Jesus might have allowed the conversation to lapse, he says something to provoke a new kind of response. We see this woman experiencing different emotions: surprise, humour, curiosity, joy, achievement. Some of what follows is abstract, bits of theology and philosophy; other subjects are deeply personal and concrete, like the history of a person's relationships. This encounter may have started in the "Green" zone, but what follows is something else, thanks to grace.

With all that in mind, I'd like to turn again to our Epistle reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul makes the point that I want to make about learning and grace in different terms. He talks about suffering.

Therefore [he says]... we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.  
[Romans 5:1-5]

What Paul says here explains why, for Christians, there is not really such a thing as a hopeless situation. Maybe we find ourselves in a place like Massah and Meribah, where we are angry and tired and thirsty, and the only plan left to us is to start hitting things with a big stick. Or maybe our problem is the opposite: maybe we are too comfortable, and there is not enough tension in our life to draw us out of our familiar ruts.

In times of desperation, and in times of comfort, God pours the Holy Spirit into our hearts, drawing us into a place of learning and growth. And so God gives us hope, a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. Lord Jesus, give us this water always.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.