“Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.”

Let’s set the scene – this is part of the Exodus story. The people of Israel had been held as slaves in Egypt. Life had been hard, Pharaoh was a harsh taskmaster. They laboured in sweltering heat day after day, every aspect of their lives was under someone else’s control.

But God heard their cry, he had called Moses, perhaps a most unlikely choice and certainly someone who felt he wasn’t up to the task. Moses was a reluctant leader.

We know the story, how Moses, who had himself fled from Egypt, went back and challenged Pharaoh – let my people go.

Then came the plagues, the escape into the desert, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the years in the wilderness.

Life in the wilderness was hard. Far harder it seemed than life back in Egypt. The people remembered the food, they forgot the suffering. As someone said this week, when we look back it is through rose tinted glasses.

In his Rule St Benedict told his community to take their past seriously, and not through rose tinted glasses. We need to be honest.

*Listen readily to holy reading, and devote yourself often to prayer. Every day with tears and sighs confess your sins to God in prayer and change from these evil ways in the future.*

The ancient world saw the gift of tears as a sign of God’s grace. If we are able to face that which has distorted life in the past then we can avoid the making same mistakes in the future. This is not a popular concept in modern culture, but perhaps it needs to be. Joan Chittister writes, “Life, Benedict implies, is a tapestry woven daily from yesterday’s threads. The colours don’t change, only the shapes we give them. Without the past to guide us, the future itself may succumb to it.”

The past couple of years have taken us into a new wilderness. Much that we took for granted has gone, we have a choice before us how we look to the future.

There will be some who hanker for things as they were before. There will be others who will wish everything to be different. There is a Christian path of being realistic about the past, being realistic about ourselves, that can help us shape what comes next.

Our church councils, for example, have looked at things we have done before, things we see good in and wish to do again, but things we know we need to do differently this time round. I’ll give you a couple of examples.

At St Peter’s our Monday Knit and Natter has become a Wednesday Coffee and Chat. What’s the difference? Maybe not a lot. It is a morning rather than an afternoon. It is twice a month rather than once. It moved days to be avoid clashes with other events, so it is open to a wider range of people. It is one small step to create a time and a place where people can meet just to be together. As such it is something we can do to help break down social isolation which we know affects too many people.

At St Mary’s we have looked at our village fair, something that is important as a fundraising event, but that’s not what people talk about. What they talk about is the friendship and working together, the sense of community and a shared commitment to celebrate life. Those who have led it in the past have been courageously realistic about how we need to do it differently in the future. And that relies on a wider range of people taking leadership.

When the wilderness seemed overwhelming Moses complained to God. This task is just too difficult. These people are just too awkward. And what did God do?

What he didn’t do is to ask more of Moses. Quite the opposite. Go find seventy others, share this task with them. Of course, then, as now, having tasted the responsibility many didn’t continue, but some did. And they did it differently.

When Eldad and Medad remained in the camp and prophesied the former leadership felt threatened. Joshua, Moses’ assistant – for which read, next leader in waiting – pleaded with Moses to stop them.

But that isn’t God’s way. “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.” Moses wasn’t afraid of different people doing things in a different way.

Jesus had the same confrontation with his disciples. When they tried to stop a man acting in Jesus’ name because he wasn’t one of them he rebuked them. Anyone who does good in my name will inherit their reward.

If you go to the Cross outside St Peter’s in Chester you may meet the Town Crier. Wearing his red robe and tricorn hat, ringing his bell, he is popular with tourists. An American couple asked him if it is true you can walk all the way round the city on the Roman walls.

Oh yes, said the Crier, you can go this way round, or that way round, all the way, and you’ll end up back here.

Gee, that’s amazing, they said, which way’s shortest?

There are different ways to discover God’s will. There are different paths towards God. There are different journeys to build his kingdom. But there are no short cuts.

Our readings today are difficult. Both point to letting go of the past, letting go of power, letting go of self-sufficiency. Both suggest we need to work with others, perhaps others we don’t yet know, who may be different from us, and do things differently to us. And that will be hard. It was hard in Moses’ time. It was hard in Jesus’ time. We have no reason to think it will be any different today.

Like Moses we may feel we’re not up to the task. Like Moses we may be reluctant to take up a new direction. Like Joshua, or the disciples, we may mistrust those different from us.

Benedict advises us to listen readily to holy reading and devote ourselves often to prayer. In a recent survey younger people, those aged 18-34, are shown to pray twice as often as older people, that’s those aged 55 and over. In term of attending worship the younger age group are three times more likely to participate.

Maybe that isn’t church as we know it, maybe we need to listen again to Moses’ words - “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.”