

Sermon 3 September 2017

All today's readings, Exodus 3.1-15, Psalm 105.1-6, 23-26, Matthew 16.21-28 and Romans 12.9-21, stand well together and in them we can see a common theme which can inform our understanding of the nature of God.

How does God speak to us and with what does he charge us? How can God's commission to each of us as individuals be recognised and understood and God's will be discharged through our lives and actions? How can we best hear God? How must we react when God speaks to us?

The Old Testament reading today tells the story of Moses and the burning bush. God's Commission to Moses.

It is a story I am very familiar with since my school cap badge for twelve years of my life was, in fact, a depiction of a burning bush. This image is instantly recognisable by many people of many faiths. Not just Christians but Jews and Muslims alike. It is an international rebus for God speaking to humanity. A theophany like Pentecost but one which culminates with God speaking to us all and giving us his Holy Law.

So who exactly was Moses?

There is no record in contemporary Egyptian accounts of Moses or the Exodus and no pottery shard evidence in Canaan to confirm the historicity of this event. But there are facts, there is faith and there is truth. And no one can doubt that this story speaks to a universal truth.

We know Moses was a Levite. A son of Amran and Jacobed. His family probably came to Egypt with Joseph's people. Seventy people (souls trans nepes) but with a number of household members women and children.

Times were tough. He was exposed to the river Nile. Infanticide then and now is surprisingly common when economic circumstance are tough. Discovered by Pharaoh's daughter and brought up in her house.

An accidental murderer who fled Egypt and found sanctuary in Midian, living at the bottom of the social structure tending sheep.

God chose Moses to deliver his message salvation to Israel. Yet he was a refugee, a murderer and a nobody. God clearly does not restrict his contact to the rich, the famous, the celebrity or even the good. God's message is there for all of us to hear.

But to hear God, Moses first had to listen. He noted a curious sight. A burning bush. Leaving his flock of sheep presumably with other sheep herders he ascended the lower reaches of Mt Nebo. We can be reasonably sure he did not have to massively exert himself as the higher reaches of Mt Nebo are barren and he was wearing sandals when he approached the bush. A challenging climb would have seen him carrying his sandals to ensure he did not slip on the rocks.

So, perhaps, to hear God we too must listen and, as with Moses make some small effort to prepare to hear God. Get away from company and be alone perhaps.

The next and quite staggering thing we can deduce here is that Moses did not know of the nature of God. Why should he? He was brought up by Pharaoh's daughter in an Egyptian palace.

God spoke to Moses yet Moses asked God for a name! Now names are tags we give each other to allow us to distinguish ourselves one from the other. How could God have a name if God were alone? It is logically impossible. Moses, a Jew by birth, had no knowledge of the God of his forefathers. Yet, again, he was chosen by God to deliver salvation to Israel.

So perhaps, if we listen hard enough, we can hear God's voice to us from individuals who have had no past experience of formal faith but have been touched by God at some stage and have God's message of love and redemption to pass to us. Holy scripture proclaimed from a pulpit may inspire us. But so may a simple message of love from any of the least of God's people.

When Moses was approached by God and given God's Commission he was hesitant, found excuses, did not want to act. The task must have seemed daunting. Take on the might of the regional superpower practically alone. Yet with God's help he succeeded. Perhaps when we are called to by God the task provided may seem insurmountable but, with God on our side, anything is possible.

The Book of Exodus, appears to have been written down in its present form during the Babylonian Captivity from now lost written sources and oral traditions. This captivity ended in 538 BC when Cyrus freed Israel while the Exodus occurred in the mid 13th C BC. So how accurate is the account likely to be?

Well pretty accurate! Oral traditions can be preserved over centuries. Heinrich Schliemann found Troy with the help of the Iliad. Yet the Trojan War occurred around the time of the Exodus and was first written down in the 7th C BC. Roughly over the same period.

One possible interpretation of the Exodus story is that, being written by slaves in captivity in Babylon, it may have slightly over emphasised the captivity narrative at the expense of the spiritual dimension. It might be argued that God called Moses to bring God's people into a more proper relationship with God. If so there is one mighty truth we might consider.

At the time of the Exodus, Egypt, or at least the Nile delta where the store cities of Pithon and Rameses were sited, were going into likely drought. No straw for bricks suggests limited straw to feed animals. Use of river rushes to complete the demand for bricks shows us how God might have visited the first nine plagues on the land of Egypt.

But the tenth, the death of the firstborn is rather different.

"... At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock...."

To be spared death, the Angel passed over houses where a sacrifice of lamb had been made and the door lintels smeared with blood.

This is a chilling thought. If the Exodus story speaks at some level to a spiritual truth, the loss of faith of the generation of the parent is visited with the spiritual death of the generation of the child.

Is that what has happened to us today?

More tellingly, it was not sufficient for a believer, an Israelite if you wish, to hold to his faith; but hold it close to his breast. It had to be proclaimed to the world by the marking of a door.

Perhaps today we have been too complaisant. We have held to a comfortable, non confronting belief when we should have been proclaiming our faith. And our children have paid the penalty of spiritual death.

Lastly here, the picture that emerges of God in the Old Testament at this point is a rather uncompromising one. A Lord of Hosts mighty in battle. A God urging his people to steal all they can from the Egyptians and flee to a promised land. This picture of God is being used to good effect by the Yes case in our present debate on gay marriage.

But Jesus sets this straight.

In Mark 10.2-12, he notes that the Israelites "hardness of heart" compelled Moses to allow divorce. In other words, the nature of the heart of the children of Israel set a limit to what Moses was expected to achieve.

In a like manner, God may not call us to bring the world to a state of perfection. But simply, to move it along the way. God recognised that with Moses there would be a limit as to how far he could bring a harsh people along a path of understanding of God's true nature. We will doubtless find that we will not be asked to achieve the unachievable.

So, from this story, we can see that God speaks to the very lowest. But we must make an effort to listen. And perhaps be prepared to make an effort to place ourselves in God's way. Formal training in theology or ministry may not be a requirement for the Duty Statement of the job. We may, we probably will, hesitate and find excuses but we will not be asked to do the impossible. Finally, having faith is not enough. If we want the next generation to know God and God's love for us all we must publicly demonstrate our commitment for all to see.

The Psalm (105.1-6,23-26) is the second of the three great history psalms. Its date and original setting are uncertain. But what we can easily see is that a note of triumphalism in Israel's understanding of the Exodus story has emerged.

Now the "Land of Ham" is not, as you might expect, a place for cured meats somewhat at odds with the usual Jewish dietary traditions. It is a reference of Egypt and its people as descending from Ham, the son of Noah. Ham was also the ancestor of the Cushites and Canaanites and as such destined to be ruled by the sons of Shem and Japheth. Pride, as they say, may well come before a fall. And any national pride on a past and present national identity can always be overthrown in the most unexpected ways. Israel entered bondage in Egypt, in Babylon, in Rome and, more recently, in Nazi Germany

This reminds us to stay true to God and keep "on message". Issues great and small surround us all the time, coming and going. But only God remains eternally.

The Gospel reading (Matthew 16.21-28) lies between the Commission of the Keys where Peter is promised the keys to the kingdom of heaven having recognised Jesus as the Messiah; and the transfiguration where Peter, James and John are given a clear demonstration of God's favour to Jesus.

Peter has recognised Jesus as Messiah but is confused as to what this means. So what sort of a Messiah were the Jews looking for?

In the movie, Lawrence of Arabia, a Sheikh of the Banu Howeitat, Auda Abu Tayi (Anthony Quinn) explains what it means to be a tribal leader to Lawrence over a very public dinner in his tent.

"..83 great wounds, all got in battle. 75 men have I killed with my own hands in battle. I scatter, I burn my enemies' tents. I take away their flocks and herds. The Turks pay me a golden treasure yet I am poor. Because I am a river to my people..."

I suspect this sort of Messiah is what Peter, the disciples and the people of Israel were hoping for.

So Jesus had to explain to them why he was there. Jesus and his message had not been welcomed by Israel, so two things remained to be done. He had to found a community and give his life as a ransom for many and this needed to be made plain to his disciples.

He had to rebuke Peter his rock from the previous chapter of Matthew!

Perhaps in carrying out our understanding of our Commission from God we too may be misunderstood. This is certainly true today as many are reviled for raising concerns at the direction our society is heading, even though our convictions are respectfully held. This misunderstanding can be hurtful both to ourselves and to others in our community.

So perhaps we, like Jesus, need to gently explain our journey here. We can hold and express views on issues of social justice, refugees, immigration and so on. Not everyone may agree. Even fellow Christians may differ in their approach to these issues. But, like Jesus, we can always try while understanding that misunderstandings as to our motivation can always occur.

Finally the Epistle. Romans 12.9-21. Exhortations for the Christian community.

This wonderful discourse is, of course, followed by Romans 13.1-7 where Paul explains how Christian should relate to the civil authority. But this passage explains how we should live within our Christian communities and, by extension, with our fellow citizens at a social level. How to live as a faith community.

And what great instruction we are given here. This is our clear commission from God to us and expressed most eloquently through Paul. And it can be summed up simply.

Live together in love and respect, one for the other.

"..Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection.."

So this instruction ties together the common theme in today's readings. As Moses was commissioned by God. As Jesus was commissioned, so we are commissioned.

God can and will speak to us if we have ears to hear. We must listen!

The way may be easy. The way may be hard.

But we can succeed with God at our side.

Let us pray

Heavenly Father. Gives us ears to hear you. Hearts to love you. And the courage to follow when you lead us. May we always remain in the shadow of your love. Now and forever.

Amen