

Lent 3 Year C

Exodus 3, I Cor 10, Luke 13

The book of Exodus comes to us, as does the rest of the Pentateuch, over many centuries of songs and stories, told and retold before being written and conflated hundreds of years after they began life. Perhaps none of these stories is as well known as that of Moses encounter with the Lord at the burning bush on the mountain of Horeb or Sinai. Its fame is well deserved, and this little tale and the words it contains are as significant as anything else within the Old Testament, for it is here that Moses learns the most important truth of all: who is God.

In our Bibles, the chances are that the name of the God of Israel will be represented by the English word “Lord.” – I am the Lord your God, thus says the Lord and so on. But Lord here is a pious rendering of a name, the name “Yahweh”, the name of Israel’s God. Moses asks a perfectly fair question. When I go to Egypt and proclaim the will of the God of Israel, they will ask me who this God is. What shall I say? It is absolutely crucial to our understanding of the Hebrew scriptures to realise that they are written in a world of religious competition. There are many gods around, just as there are many nations. The remarkable claim of the small and seemingly insignificant kingdoms of Israel and

Judah would be that their God, Yahweh, is in fact the God who made the heavens and the earth.

At this stage in the story, we have not reached such claims. Some evidence suggests that the name Yahweh belonged to a God associated with the wilderness of Sinai for several centuries before Moses and the Exodus. Others see it as a later addition to Hebrew faith. But the ancient storyteller is anxious to make some sense of the name of Israel’s God, and this is done by playing on the fact that it seemed from its sound to come from some form of the verb to be: perhaps I will be, perhaps I cause to be – it is an old and insoluble problem. So when the divine presence speaks the words “I am what I am”, he is, in part, explaining his name. He is also, of course, refusing to be limited or circumscribed by it, so that his power and his freedom to exercise it are entailed by his statement of his own identity – I will be whatever I will be.

For Christian theology, from its earliest development in the Greek speaking world, this mysterious statement has been taken as a fundamental theological truth: that God is the source of all being, or existence. In fact, in the middle ages, theologians would argue that the best way to think and talk about God is to describe him as “existence itself”, not any particular kind of thing, not this sort of being or that sort of being, but that which causes, we might say which allows, existence in

every created thing. This is, of course, a quintessentially Old Testament notion – the question of who God is, is answered when we realise that the God of Israel is the source of all creation, the one who made the heavens and the earth.

Moses' encounter with the Lord, with Yahweh, is an example of a theophany, of the appearance of God. Although for us, in our familiarity with the Christmas stories, the phrase “angel of the Lord” describes a white winged man, in the ancient scriptures the angel of the Lord is simply the physical manifestation of the Lord himself. Moses encounters nothing less than the living God, and that meeting is not simply something awe-inspiring – though it clearly is that, hence his removing his shoes and fearing to look. It is somehow frightening but it is also attractive, it lures him. The presence is what causes him to stop in his journey as a herdsman, to turn aside and attend to that which is drawing him in.

The need to “turn aside”, and the ability to do it should be daily aspects of the Christian life. The “turning aside” which Moses undertakes is the acknowledgement of the presence of God, the God who reveals himself as the ground of all existence, the creator on whom we rely for every breath and moment of our life. “Turning aside” in prayer and in worship, in reflection and study, enables us not simply to answer the mysterious

question of Who is God? It also answers our inevitable questions about ourselves, because the identity of God as creator is a prerequisite for our understanding our own identity, our coming to realise that we are who we are because we are children of God.

Failure to acknowledge the God of life has a predictable result: the opposite of life is death. The victims of death and disaster of whom Jesus speaks in the gospels are ordinary human beings as you are and I am. The knowledge that God is, is not enough for us – Paul is careful to remind his audience in Corinth that the children of Israel, those who had been brought from slavery to freedom, from death to life, were led and sustained by the God of their redemption throughout their time in the wilderness. However, even they turned not to his presence but away from it, drinking from the water of life which Christians recognised as Christ himself, even whilst they continued their rebellious and idolatrous ways. Refusal to accept life, refusal to accept God, is the contradiction of the divine which we call sin, and its consequence is not life but death.

Lent is, in a sense, a “turning aside”. It is a time for doing, a time for overcoming sin, a time for learning who we really are by learning first who God really is, the creator of us all, and then learning that which for us is even more mysterious, learning that this God creates and sustains us with nothing other than love, infinite and unconditional love for you

and for me. It is that love which draws us in and teaches us who we really are. The hardest thing of all to surrender is the notion that we know ourselves best. We, in all our foolishness and pig-headed self centredness, think we know the real truth: we are actually fundamentally bad, fundamentally dead, fundamentally unlovable. The God of life tells us otherwise, that we are who we are because he knows us best of all.

Reason and experience might show us that our love is selfish, that we give in order to get, that we must protect ourselves to survive. But the presence of God to which we must turn aside is a presence which burns but does not consume. It contradicts our expectation, our fear of danger, our reluctance to surrender ourselves. It teaches us to believe that this God of ours is the one who will be what he will be, and that we too will be that which he will have us be. If we turn aside and find ourselves in his presence of God, we will find also that for the creator everything is possible, freedom from slavery, water from stone, death from life, even – and most miraculous of all – love for the loveless.