

## God's Promise

The reading from Exodus today is a wonderfully creative one that we are not meant to take literally but which takes us into the Old Testament world where, through the picture it paints, we learn much about God.

In this passage Moses gets to only see the back (the backside?) of God. I imagine this feature is not what immediately springs to mind when we think about God. So is this a bad deal for Moses? Well apparently not because earlier in the text (verse 18) Moses says, "Now show me your glory" and God replies "I will cause all of my goodness to pass in front of you." So the backside of God is his good side. Verse 20 tells us that the ultimate and total nature of God remains hidden as no human being can look directly upon God and live. But nevertheless all of God's goodness and glory is on display to Moses in this fleeting glimpse of God's back.

Let's just recap a little. This request of Moses in verse 18 "now show me your glory" is the third and final request Moses makes in chapter 33. Moses has already asked God to make His ways known to him so that he may continue to find favour in God's sight. But in a second request Moses also wants to extend this beyond himself and is asking God to acknowledge that all the people of Israel will be included in this "favour" and that God's presence will accompany His people as they move on into the promised land of Canaan. Verse 17 where God says, "I will do this very thing," confirms that God is indeed willing to extend his favour to all the people.

This guarantee of God's presence is important, as what it shows up for us is a developing understanding amongst ancient peoples about the nature of God. In ancient times different groups of people worshipped different gods and these gods were thought to be more or less confined to the geographic areas inhabited by each group or tribe of people. For a people on the move like the Israelites it was important to get a guarantee that, as they moved to new surroundings, they would not be leaving their God behind. So here we see a revelation by the Old Testament writers about the nature of God--that God is not defined by place but that God's reach is universal and cannot be confined by geography.

So Moses is reassured about God's continuing presence. But in his third request he rather peremptorily demands of God "show me your glory".

What is this talk of God's glory intended to mean?

This term "God's glory" occurs a number of times in Genesis and Exodus. For example when the people of Israel were in the wilderness and grumbled against Moses because they were very hungry the "glory of the Lord" appeared in a cloud and God provided them with meat (quail) and manna (bread) (Exodus 16: 7,10). And at the time when the Covenant with Moses was ratified by God (Exodus 24: 16-17) the glory of the Lord was seen in a consuming fire on top of the mountain.

God's glory is God's goodness—God's benevolence, graciousness and generosity extended to all his people. It is all the good things, all the blessings that God's people receive--the guarantee of God's presence. This is God's glory.

As the biblical story goes on the Israelites take possession of the "good things" of the land of Canaan. But instead of being full of gratitude and continuing to faithfully worship and serve God they too often lapsed into complacency and sometimes greed, they failed to maintain equity and hospitality within the community ignoring the laws that God had put in place to ensure a just and beneficial community life. When crops failed, diseases spread among the people or enemies defeated and oppressed them the prophets of old had to remind them that they needed to maintain their faith, defined in these circumstances as continued reliance on God. To maintain their faith in God no matter what fate might bring.

It brings back to mind for me the title of the 1960's song "I never promised you a rose garden". God's promise to the people of Israel was that his presence was always with them in the good times, the bad times and beyond death. God's presence does not immunize us against the vicissitudes of life--the challenges of illness, anxiety, suffering and grief. The times when all human possibilities seem exhausted, when God seems absent. That is when our faith, like that of the Israelites, is severely tested.

Since Old Testament times many centuries have elapsed so what do we see of God's glory today? What do *we* make of God's graciousness and generosity?

Here in Australia, although there are obvious inequities, we can hardly argue that as a society we are not materially very well off. We share many, many material blessings. But census statistics suggest that a declining number of us acknowledge and give thanks to God for where we find ourselves.

And when we look around the world today it is very hard to see how the ideal of loving, just and beneficial communities based on God's values are present. What we do see is a great deal of alienation and suffering.

The world is racked by cruel and pitiless wars dislocating the lives of millions. Terrorism related violence is endemic and many people live in fear of the next attack or bomb blast. Some nations viz. North Korea and the United States are at each other's throats. There are a considerable number of countries that are only ever a step or two from famine and significant health problems for their populations while at the same time we learn that in developed countries, the mega rich are getting richer at the expense of the rest of the world.

It appears to me that alienation from God and God's values reigns supreme. Until the violence stops and until resources are shared equitably and with justice for all (here in Australia too), we, the world, are certainly separated from God and will suffer the consequences.

So is there any hope on the horizon?

There are a couple of things that might provide some light for us.

First is something we may learn from our Gospel reading from Matthew today. Like many of Jesus' sayings what he says is enigmatic. But what I take from it is that Jesus is saying that our salvation is not going to come from the material world. He acknowledges that we have to live in that world—that we can't escape the Caesar part—the world as it is---but to be whole and fulfilled, to be truly human, we must acknowledge and live in God's presence.

So how do we do that? We are not as individuals going to solve all of the world's ills as referred to before. But we can continue to reflect on our own faith, look back on things we have learnt before through our own experience of God's presence, recall the promises of God's word such as in the Exodus story we read today and the assurances Jesus makes time after time as recorded in the New Testament.

At a wider level we have the support of our families, our friends, the support of people we can trust, perhaps those we know who have experienced some of the bitterness and difficulties of life and remain faithful to God.

What we are charged to do is to maintain the faith. Coming together every week as we do enables us to tell a story in profound opposition to the individualism, the consumerism, the violence and the militarism that mark our world.

The practice of Christian worship reminds us that another way of seeing the world is possible--a way that acknowledges God is present in our lives---a way that invokes the continuous reinvention and renewal of humanity---a way committed to social justice and liberty while opening a space for barrier-free care and compassion, for diversity and for spiritual nourishment.

God promised the people of Israel that they would never lose his presence. The coming of Jesus confirms that promise that no matter what happens, through God we gain life, we receive wholeness, and we become truly human.

“I never promised you a rose garden” goes the song and life for us may not always be trouble free. Life will always have its challenges and sometimes major difficulties, but faith in God’s promise is our salvation now and for evermore.

Amen.