

August 28th 2011 – Pentecost 17 – Wesley Uniting 9 & 10.30am

Reading: Exodus 3: 1-15

Theme: “Take off your shoes, for you are on holy ground”

Introduction

Today's Old Testament reading is probably one of the best known Biblical stories and is part of the Hebrew, Muslim and Christian tradition.

Moses is in the desert area of the Sinai, and comes across this strange phenomena of a burning bush that is not consumed. We have moved a long way from where we were last Sunday. There Moses was a baby who had been strategically placed in bull rushes on the Nile so that he would be found by the Egyptian princess. This all happened and as a child and youth he was educated as a nobleman in the court of the daughter of Pharaoh. All this changed when he murdered an Egyptian slave master who was mistreating his Hebrew slaves. He fled into the Sinai and linked up with Jethro, marrying into that clan and becoming a shepherd for his father-in-law. This is where we find him in today's reading.

The reading can be broken down into different sections:

Exodus 3: 1- 3 ‘The setting of the God encounter – the theophany.’

4- 6 ‘The initial call by God to Moses from the burning bush

7-10 ‘God’s command to Moses to bring his people out of Egypt.’

11-14 ‘Excuses by Moses and discussion between God and Moses.’

15 ‘God tells Moses what to say to the Israelites.’

Let's look at these sections and relate them back to ourselves.

1. The Setting

What amazes me is the lengths God goes to making sure our attention is gained. For Moses it was the burning bush. He thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.” (vs 3)

Certainly this would grab your attention.

What makes us stop ‘in our tracks’, so to speak, and take note of God, our spiritual well being, our direction in life, today?

For some it is illness, for others broken relationships, for some it is looking for direction/meaning in life, for others it is through life's events, in some instances it is seeing God at work in other people's lives or in nature.

Occasionally it is through unexplained happenings that bring faith questions to the forefront. You may well think of other things as well.

Finding God in unexpected places and moments can certainly change our outlook on life itself!

Moses' encounter with this burning bush that doesn't burn up certainly changes his life path.

2. The Calling

I can't speak for you, but if a voice began coming forth out of a burning bush, that wasn't really disintegrating and it was calling out my name, I'd be questioning my sanity! Yet Moses seems to accept that this is OK and simply answers 'Here I am'. I'm not sure how close to the bush Moses got but God gave instructions to stop and 'to take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' This is a practice still followed by Muslims before entering a mosque. The ground was not holy by nature but was made so by the divine presence of God. This raises for us the questions of 'What is holy?' and 'Where is God?' along with 'What should be our response?'

The church buildings are seen as 'the house of God' but is God actually housed there? No way – our God is a God who cannot be confined to a building or a place. This differentiates, to some extent, our belief in God as not confining God to our human boundaries or places. While we gather as the 'people of God', often in a church building, this is simply our religious, community place for worshipping rather than saying God is here, there or where-ever.

3. The Command

The Lord makes it clear that the misery of the Israelites in Egypt has been seen and now the command to Moses is exceptionally clear in verse 10: "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

It is only now that Moses seems to have reservations as he is given an amazingly complicated task to perform.

When I became a Christian and accepted that this was leading towards fulltime ministry I realise that I was young, naïve and accepting. I really didn't question God as I probably would have today. Annette certainly had questions as did both sets of parents when initially I told them I was going to be a Methodist/Uniting Church clergyman. I think Moses was a little older and wiser than me. He asked questions of God from the outset. However it didn't change anything. That's the problem with God, when you're set a task God doesn't seem to change it although we sometimes try to!!

So onto the excuses and the responses.

4. Discussions between God and Moses

Moses rightly raises the fact that ‘Who am I to go to Pharaoh and demand to be allowed to take the Israelites out of Egypt?’ vs 10. God simply replies: ‘I will be with you ...’

Not satisfied with this response Moses tries a different tack.

‘What about the Israelites if they ask questions and say what is the name of this God – what do I say?’

In a sense this was a ‘trick’ question to God because the name of God was so powerful that it was not used. To use the name of some-one was to have power over them and of them.

The name for the Hebrew God was a series of letters, unpronounceable on purpose as you didn’t use the name of God. The generic word “Elohim” was often used for God .The letters were JHWH or translated into the English probably YHWH. There were originally no vowels in the guttural Hebrew language and were only added in relatively recent times as various dots under the consonants to make the language useable. Hence Moses here was saying to God, how do I convey to the people who you are if I can’t even use your name. God responds with “I am who I am” and you shall tell the Israelites that ‘I am’ has sent me to you.

Again there are problems with the vowels and the translations. A possible translation that safeguards the mystery of the divine along with freedom of action is:

“I shall be who I shall be”.

This almost non name still conveys certain constants about God – God’s nature is not arbitrary or inconsistent

- God is the Living One
- God is relational
- God cares for the people
- God is past, present and future

While this may seem a little strange to us today this concept of God is allowing sovereign freedom and that God is not to be manipulated by human interference.

Moses is defeated at this point and God goes on with the commission.

Maybe this reminds us not to try to restrain or ‘box’ God in to our thought patterns but to remember that God is sovereign, beyond our understanding

and this is part of the mystery of the great faiths of the world and in particular our Christian faith.

5. Commission

Finally in verse 15 Moses is commissioned for his task and given specific details of what to say and do in the following six verses which are not included in the Lectionary reading today.

Conclusion

Moses had a pretty chequered career. He was fortunate not to be killed by Pharaoh as an infant and then for murdering an Egyptian slave master. He was empowered by God with a massive task to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. This story continues in our Lectionary readings. He continues to lead his people towards the ‘promised land’ with a series of issues in the wilderness.

What seems an impossible task is made possible through the grace of God. This is something we can take from this passage for ourselves along with the fact that God uses most unlikely people for a variety of tasks. People who are imperfect like Moses you and even me!!! Amen