

Sermon: The nature and will of God

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Exodus 3:1-15, Romans 12:9-21

The encounter between God and Moses at the burning bush is one of the most pivotal stories in the Bible. It heralds the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery, their establishment as a united people, their conquest of the promised land, and their existence as a nation for the following 1300 years.

It's also revealing about the nature and will of God, and about how God wants to relate to us. That's where I want to focus our attention this morning. Six learnings.

First we learn that God is a god who sees and hears what is happening on earth. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt: I have heard their cry", and a few verses later "The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them". God knows what's going on. That's one important learning.

Second we learn that God is a god of compassion, a god who cares when his people suffer. God wants better for his people, God wants liberation for his people from oppression and he wants them to live decently and well, in "a good and broad land flowing with milk and honey". God does not want suffering, God does not want oppression, God wants his people to live safely, securely, and well. A second important learning.

Third, we learn that the perception of God back 3400 years ago is that God is still a tribal god, the god of the Israelites but not the god of the Egyptians or the Canaanites or the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. It takes another few centuries before the prophets come to see and declare that God is god of more than just the people of Israel, that God is god of the whole world with worldwide purposes for his people who are in fact all people. And it takes until Jesus comes and declares peace and goodwill for all, forgiveness and love for the whole world, salvation, reconciliation offered to all, for us to learn that there is but one God, one creator, one life-force for the whole of earth and the whole of the universe. But back then, in the days of Jacob and Joseph and Moses and Joshua, God is seen still as a tribal god, stronger than other gods, but still a tribal god.

Fourth, we learn that God is personal. God calls to Moses, speaks with him and engages with him in a two-way conversation. God deals with Moses with enormous respect and care, personally, intimately. Moses is able to question God – "who am I that I should take on this enormous task you're asking of me" – and God responds caringly and reassuringly. We learn therefore that we are to be honest with God, to acknowledge our weaknesses, uncertainties and vulnerabilities. God's first response to Moses' anxiety as to why me, how can I possibly do this job, it's far too big far too dangerous – God's first response is simply to say "I will be with you".

Our fifth learning is that God fulfils his promises. God supplies what Moses needs, what he is to say to Pharaoh, how he is to respond to the uncertainty and fearfulness of the Israelites in slavery. God always resources us and enables us to do the tasks he asks us to take on. "I will be with you". Once we say yes to God, then God stays with us, ensuring that we receive the support and guidance we need. God stays with us, always, every day. That support often comes in the form of other people, in this instance his brother Aaron who emerged as Moses' second in command and other younger leaders like Joshua.

And sixthly we learn that we cannot and do not know everything about God. Moses brashly asks for God's name, for in ancient times to know someone's true name was to know the other deeply, fully, and to have some measure therefore of control over them. Parents have an understanding of this even today – for choosing the names of your children is a very powerful and privileged responsibility. God answers Moses with an outpouring of aspects of God's identity, but not with one simple answer that Moses or we humans can really understand. "I am who I am" says God, or given that in Hebrew the present tense and the future tense have to be discerned by the context it could be "I will be who I will be" or maybe "I am who I will be" or "I will be who I am". Where does that leave us? It's mysterious, it's enigmatic, it's deliberately unfathomable on God's part, for no human being can fully know God or be anything like the equal of God, let alone have any measure of control over God. With God, there is always mystery and wonder.

Can we relate to God in similar fashion to this encounter between God and Moses? We may not see a burning bush, but we can come to holy ground. This church, other places of worship, out in the bush in God's creation, beautiful music, great literature, magnificent art, deep silence – they can all be holy ground to us, what Celtic spirituality calls "thin places" where God feels very close, is very close.

We may not experience a conversation with God as clearly as Moses did, but we can relate to God in two-way relationship, in dialogue. We need to be honest, we need to be humble, we need to know we don't have all the answers, and we need to listen, to perceive God's presence and God's word to us which will come to us as we pray, as we study God's past dealings with people, as we engage with other Christians, with people of other faiths and even with people of no faith. And we do know that because God is a god of compassion and liberation then God's true word to us will always reflect grace, love and freedom.

We may not be asked by God to do enormous things, as Moses was, but we can be sure that God does ask of us to follow his way, the way of Christ, the way that is spelt out very carefully and very practically by the apostle Paul in today's reading from Romans. And we can be sure that God will support and guide and resorce us as we seek to follow his way of self-giving love. God will be with us, every day, always.

So this morning be reminded of the nature and will of God and the mystery of God, as we ponder again the marvellous story of Moses and God at the burning bush. To the glory of God, Amen.