



## Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

28<sup>th</sup> August 2011

*Exodus 3: 1-15, Psalm 105, Romans 12: 9-21, Matthew 16:21-28*

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The first reading from Exodus of Moses and the burning bush is a favourite reading and an iconic reading that offers much for us to contemplate. It is also one of the obvious, memorable and so too significant passages in the whole of the scriptures. Many of us have grown up with sort of Charlton Heston images, with Moses speaking in an American accent and looking like a rugby player dressed in pyjamas.

But the significance of the story is technically underwritten by presenting us with a theophany and an epiphany, an **appearance** of the divine and a **recognition** of God's presence. So if we hold the image before us like an icon as we explore the text, let's appreciate the simplicity but also look for a depth of meaning in this wonderful piece of visual theology.

In verse two we have the Divine appearance: *'There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.'* Then in verse 3 an important movement occurs: *Moses said, "I must turn aside and look..."* It is an important movement because without it nothing else would have happened. Moses had to "turn aside", he had to leave the path he was already on, and he had to adjust his orientation. It is what we so often fail to do, for we all are creatures of habit and wedded to the ruts of our own individual lives. Here we are given the value and the importance of 'turning aside' - it carries some of the same connotations of movement that are associated with repentance. Without us taking the initiative of "turning", of making a deliberate movement, we should not expect anything to change, and more than that we should not expect to encounter God.

The very same applies to the other part of Moses' movement, *'I must turn aside and look'*. We can complacently rest in having *seen* what there is to see, or like Moses we can 'look', and perhaps that comes more naturally after we adopt the first activity of turning, for then we are more open to discovering and so seeking what is to found with our new orientation : *turn aside and look.*

Verses 5 and 6 take on a slightly different quality; they almost provide us with a liturgical quality and a liturgical setting. It's almost as if they give us an 'in church' version within the setting of this icon:

*5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of*

*Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. The holy ground, the demand for reverence and the doctrinal formula uttered for the name of the Lord all carry echoes of our being 'in church'. Maybe we should consider in our being here this morning – from what have we turned, what path have we left in order to be here? Or maybe we should consider, do we see the burning bush before us in this place?*

Verses 7-10 provide the substance of this encounter

*7 Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are [alienated]*

*I have heard the cry of those oppressed*

*Indeed, I know their sufferings,*

*8 and I have come to deliver them...*

*and to bring them up out of that land*

*to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey,*

*9 The cry [of the Israelites] has now come to me;*

*10 So come, I will send you to complete my work of compassion and creation.....*

Come, I will send you to complete my work of compassion and creation: encounters with God are encounters with purpose; they are not self centred, nor are they self-directed retreats; they're not about improving ourselves. They are creative opportunities that provide an arrow of direction and inspiration toward a new wholeness, and toward a living that is whole. And as we see in the narrative, there is nothing personal in the encounter; Moses is to be consumed into the activity of God.

What follows in verse 11 is the 'Anglican response':

*11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"* Not me, leave it to someone else, or the classical cop out for the

fundamentalist: 'leave it in God's hands'. Again, we've all been there and done that. We know that energy.

What we really need to hear is in verse 12: "*I will be with you*". It's a fantastic sentence to really get, to actually hear and find a knowing, where God says, "*I will be with you*". Don't look for me elsewhere, I will be with you, the Divine investing the whole of God's self in you. And this will be an epiphany for Moses, for here God is spoken of in a new way. No longer the remote *God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*, rather a divine presence that is with us.

Here Moses is offered an epiphany that is still to be realised by the majority of those who believe in God from just about every religious tradition. And Verse 13 is a wonderful example of epiphany being realised: *Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"* Moses actually contemplates 'what if' I do what I have been asked to do? And as Moses imagines a life pathway before him, a life orientation of being 'with God', all of a sudden he no longer knows the God he knew. This is the same movement that is used in the telling of Paul's story, Paul's encounter on the road to Damascus. In his enlightenment Moses recognises the reality of God's presence and leaves behind the knowing that he had in verse 6, his Church version of God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, dogmas and

doctrines, childhood images and teachings, dearly loved images of God, all dissolve in the light of  
*"I will be with you"*

As we open our eyes, as Moses sees and apprehends the Divine, so he looks again for the name of God: *"What is his name?"* Moses looks again for the truth and the power that is embodied in the name of God. And in Verse 14 Moses receives an answer: *"I AM WHO I AM." or I AM what I will be*" The oneness and wholeness of God is revealed.

Here we could leave the story with our shoes off, standing on Holy Ground and face to face with God's divine revelation of God's being. But there is more that comes with that knowing *'I AM has sent me to you.'*" Moses receives assurance that the presence of the Divine will be with him in his own revealing of the Divine activity. There is no passing the buck; there is a knowing, an assurance that *'I will be with you'*, an assurance that in being sent to complete the activity of God, the activity of creation *'I will be with you'*.

The reality of knowing God, is in the putting our shoes back on, having turned aside from our past pathways, and now going forth aligned toward the creation of a new future in the certainty that God is with us.

If you contemplate this icon in your own time, and then turn on Parliamentary question time, do you see leaders as having a vision of a Divine creation of tomorrow? More importantly do we when we rise for morning prayer, or still the day with evening prayer, do we hold an awareness of ourselves before the burning bush?

In the Gospel reading we have an opportunity to see ourselves in the character of Peter, who in last week's reading was handed the keys to the kingdom and received a new name, a new beginning. Last week he too stood before the burning bush. This week he is found to be *"a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."* We are easily drawn into setting our minds and our hearts on 'human things' rather than 'divine things'. And yet when we stand before the burning bush, even when we take some time out on a Sunday morning, we know and we almost automatically question for ourselves *'what will it profit us if we gain the whole world but forfeit our life?'*

The gospel goes on to offer a simple orientation for life and for living: *'those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it'*. This teaching serves as a reminder to Peter whose very name was changed when he accepted the keys to the kingdom – he's now reminded again - he's the holder of the keys. It is the same illustration that we find in the icon of the burning bush. When we know ourselves as *'setting our minds not on divine things but on human things'* then we only know ourselves as consumers and are in turn being consumed unto death.

When we turn aside, even momentarily, and glimpse the burning bush, we see that which is not consumed. The bush in giving itself fully into the flame is not consumed. This is a life orientation worth seeking, worth turning aside for, and as we follow the Moses narrative it is

the path to freedom from oppression, a path to wholeness and to a new creation. Toward a new future, in '*a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey*'.

The reality of knowing God is in the putting our shoes back on, having turned aside from our past pathways, and now going forth aligned toward the creation of a new future in the certainty that God is with us. The reality of knowing God is the giving of ourselves into the future of all. Truly, we must turn aside and look.

The Lord be with you  
Peter Humphris