

"I am ... who I am"

Sunday 6th June 2010

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Readings:

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 135:1-13

John 8:48-59

People who are not yet Christians sometimes struggle with an apparent discontinuity between God as he is revealed in the Old Testament, and God as we see him in Jesus in the New Testament ... but perhaps it's not only unbelievers who have this problem?

It is fair to say that sometimes even we who believe find it hard to reconcile the blood and guts of Joshua and Judges, Samuel and Kings, with the loving compassion of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'. Maybe we have been taken in by an unbalanced reading of the Old Testament, and a false image which people so often have of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we are guilty of trying to 'make God in our image', which is a kind of idolatry. There is a 'pick and mix' approach to religion which has become very much a part of our society today. People choose what they want to believe ... either bits and pieces of established religious understanding, or ideas from their own imaginations, and put them together to devise their own version of the truth – and all at the expense of discovering the real truth.

You hear people say 'Well, that's what I believe' as though their choice to believe this or that made it true ... however fanciful or outlandish their home-made faith might be. But truth is not what we make it ... truth is what God makes it ... and the whole of the Scriptures – Old Testament and New – is concerned with truth revealed.

Rather than 'God made in our image', the Scriptures reveal God as he truly is.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to take a look at what the Scriptures actually have to say about what God is like, including some of the 'I am' statements of Jesus. Our aim is to develop a truer understanding of what God is really like, rather than the storybook image people so often carry with them from childhood.

We want to understand and encounter God as he really is, recognising that we cannot package God up to suit our preferences ...

... and we begin with Moses ... an ageing refugee shepherd in the wilderness of Sinai.

Of course the whole thing had begun a few hundred years before Moses, with God revealing himself to Abram as creator, provider and deliverer ... and calling Abram to leave what is now Iraq and travel to the land of Canaan. God promised that he would make Abram a great nation through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed. But all that had rather got lost through four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, and it was time for a new beginning.

And so we come to Exodus chapter 3 ... where God reveals his name.

Names are really important.

Take a look at Psalm 135, part of which we read this morning.

The Psalm begins with expressions of praise the Lord ... and encouragements to praise 'the *name* of the Lord'. This is important because, especially in the world of the Old Testament, a name was much more than just a label to identify someone ... the name revealed important things about the one who was named.

So Psalm 135 urges us who are his servants to praise the name of the Lord, because the Lord is good ... to "*sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant*" (verse 3) All well and good.

The Psalmist then goes on to remind us of God's greatness and power ... that he can do whatever pleases him "*in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.*" He is the bringer of clouds and lightning, rain and wind.

He *also* goes on to remind us that God struck down the firstborn of Egypt and defeated many nations ... killing mighty kings and defeating armies to give the land of Canaan as an inheritance to the people of Israel. That's a bit more uncomfortable for our modern ears. Our God is a mighty God, and sometimes he has revealed his might in acts of violence and warfare.

The Psalmist doesn't presume to comment on these things ... he merely reports them, and says (verse 13):

"Your name, O Lord, endures forever, your renown, O Lord, through all generations."

God's name is to be praised, because he is who he is.

I wonder how those of you who are parents chose the names that you gave to your children. After all, you didn't know them when you named them, and you didn't know what sort of people they would turn out to be.

Was it just a matter of giving them a name that you liked, or was the meaning important to you ... if only as an expression of hope? When we named our children, we chose:

Jonathan ... which means: "Gift of God"
Matthew ... which also means: "Gift of God"
and Joshua ... which means: "God saves"

We didn't get to choose Gareth's name, because he was named five months before he came to us ... but we were intrigued to discover some time later that one meaning of Gareth was given as "he who ravages". We are really grateful that his second name is David ... which means: "Beloved" ... which he certainly is!

So, then, going back to Abram, we find that God changes his name from Abram ... which means 'exalted father', to Abraham ... which means 'father of many' – because God has chosen to bless Abraham and make him the father of a great nation.

Then there was Moses ... adopted by Pharaoh's daughter after his mother had hidden him among the bulrushes to save him from the murderous edict of the King, and named Moses ... meaning 'draw out' ... because she said: "*I drew him out of the water.*"

There are plenty of other examples in the Scriptures, not least Jesus re-naming Simon and calling him Peter - 'the rock' – because of the role he was to play in leading the early Church.

Now, let's get back to Exodus 3.

Moses, you will recall, having been raised in the Egyptian Royal Palace as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, had run away to Midian following an incident in which he killed an Egyptian slave-driver.

Moses had seen the Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, and when he discovered that his crime was known, he fled in fear of his life. He settled in Midian, married the daughter of the local priest, and settled down to family life, working as a shepherd for his father-in-law.

He could have been forgiven for thinking that his adventures were over ... but when he was no less than eighty years old, God stepped dramatically in to Moses' life. He was out in the desert, searching out pasture for his sheep, when he came to Mount Horeb ... '*the mountain of the Lord*', which we also know as Mount Sinai.

Rather unexpectedly ... God turned up!

I don't know what sort of mental image you have of the Burning Bush ... verse 2 says:

*"There the **angel** of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a*

bush."

Whatever it looked like, it was enough to catch Moses' attention and draw him near ... intrigued at the very least to see what was going on.

Notice that verse 4 says: "**God** called to him from within the bush."

So who was it, then? An angel of the Lord? ... or the Lord himself?

We often get this in Old Testament narratives. Sometimes the text refers to an angel, sometimes to God himself. In Judges Chapter 6 we read about an angel of the Lord appearing to Gideon ... and then a few verses later it says "*The Lord turned to him.*"

The point is that the outcome is the same. If God sends an angel, the angel comes with the authority of God himself. If God appears to someone, other than when Jesus himself came, he reveals himself in angelic form. Either way ... it's God at work.

So God appears to Moses, calling to him from the Burning Bush, and Moses ... whose experience of God is pretty limited at this point says: "*Here I am.*"

"*Take off your sandals*" says God, "*for the place where you are standing is holy ground.*"

Why is it holy? Because God is there!

Any place of encounter with God is surely holy ground, wherever it may be. It might be at home ... on a lonely windswept beach ... in the quiet of a beautiful garden ... at the top of a majestic mountain ... in the busyness of the workplace – for some, it is in the prison cell.

On a good day, it might even be in Church!

Wherever it might be ... whenever it might be ... when we meet with God we are on holy ground, and figuratively or literally, we'd better take off our shoes!

It was at this point ... at Mount Horeb, in the wilderness, that God chose to reveal himself to Moses. It was God's choice ... he set the agenda ... he reveals himself, after all, to whom he chooses, and where and when he chooses. And as Moses would soon discover, God chooses to reveal more of himself as he sees fit. It's not a one-off thing.

Where was your Mount Horeb?

When did God first choose to make himself known to you ... presumably not through a burning bush, but in some way? Was it quietly or dramatically ... long ago or only recently?

It may be that you are sitting here this morning aware that you have never really had an encounter with God ... or it may be that although you came to know God many years ago, God now seems somehow far away, and your faith is less about a relationship with God and more about hanging on grimly to a commitment you made in the distant past.

If either of these is the case, then know this ... that God will make himself known to all who are seeking him ... he has promised never to turn anyone away. Know too that it is we who shut him out, and not the other way around ... but as we open ourselves more and more to him, so he will enable us to see more of who he is, and to experience his love.

If God seems far away ... or if you are not even sure that you have a real relationship with God ... then do go to the Chapel after the service and ask members of the Prayer Ministry team to pray with you. They will be pleased to meet with you.

Let's see how it was with Moses.

First, God revealed himself as the God of history ... the trustworthy God of Moses' ancestors (verse 6):

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."

This was reassuring ... Moses knew something about these people, and how God had led them and blessed them ... lessons learned at his mother's knee before he was taken to live in Pharaoh's palace. Moses knew that God had a good track record ... and like Moses, we too can trust that God can be relied upon.

Even so ... realising just who was speaking to him, Moses was terrified (verse 6b):

"At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God."

... as well he might be.

Don't forget, Moses was on the run for Murder. What might God want to say to him?

Then, God revealed himself as the God who cares (verse 7):

"I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering."

We may wonder why it is that God waited so long ... the people of Israel had

been in slavery for many years, and had suffered badly at the hands of their Egyptian masters. We have to be honest and say that we don't know the answer to that ... any more than we can answer why some people suffer today.

There is no point in pretending we understand what we do not understand.

Why does this person get cancer and that person have a heart attack?

Why do babies die?

Why doesn't God stop the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza?

Why did God let the oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico happen?

Why did God allow Derrick Bird to kill and injure all those people in Cumbria on Wednesday?

We don't know the answer to these questions ... and somehow we have to learn to trust that God in his infinite wisdom has reasons beyond our understanding. But we must never allow our lack of understanding to make us think that God doesn't care. He weeps with those who weep ... he stands alongside those who are persecuted ... he shares in human suffering ... and he challenges us to work with him for justice, peace and reconciliation.

Next, God revealed himself as the God who acts (verse 8):

"So, I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey"

Whatever the reason for delay until now, this was the time to act. God had come to rescue his people ... just as he would come many times to rescue them through history, until finally he sent his only Son to win the ultimate battle over sin and death.

But wait! ... God comes to act ... but he also says "Go!"

God did not choose to send down fire from heaven to destroy the Egyptians and free the Israelites. He did not send armies of angels to overcome the troops of Egypt and set the prisoners free. He did not simply change Pharaoh's heart.

God said (verse 10):

"I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

What follows is a great debate between Moses and God in which Moses tries to persuade God that he's got a better idea ... but God does not relent. He has indeed decided that now is the time to take action for his people, but Moses had a major part to play.

Why is this? Wouldn't it be more efficient if God just exercised his supernatural powers and sorted the world out? Surely he could stop war, heal every disease,

end persecution, free every prisoner ... and make us all perfect while he was at it?

Of course he could ... but what would that make us?

... certainly not free individuals made in the image of God ... people made with a conscience ... people with creativity ... people with enormous potential for good ... people with the capacity to take responsibility ... people who were always meant to be friends of God, and co-workers with him.

We can't have it all ways. If we are to be truly human and truly free, then we must be free to mess up and free to put things right ... people made in the image of God.

God gave Moses the task of going to Pharaoh and setting the wheels in motion, and it was a hard task with many setbacks ... but God did not leave him to do it alone. He kept his promise to be with him all the way.

The God of history ... the God who cares ... the God who acts ...

Moses asked God what he should tell the Israelites when they asked about God, "What is his name?" ... and God said (verse 14):

"I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

When Jesus was challenged by the Jews about his credentials, they said (John 8:48):

"Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?"

... and he appalled them by claiming that he knew Abraham ... that Abraham (verse 56):

"rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

They simply could not grasp that all that the prophets had prophesied had actually come to pass, and that their Messiah had really come. They were so anxious about getting it right, that they tried to put God in a box, and dictate how God ought to behave.

Jesus troubled them so much because he did not keep their rules, or fulfil their expectations. So when Jesus said (verse 58):

"I tell you the truth ... before Abraham was born, I am!"

... they were so enraged at what they took to be blasphemy, that they picked up stones to stone him.

How are we to describe or explain God? ... and how is God to explain himself to us?

If God were explainable ... definable ... describable ... then surely he would not be God.

God is who God is. Sometimes we just need to be content with the mystery, and with the Psalmist to worship him with wonder, love and praise (Psalm 135:13):

"Your name, O Lord, endures forever, your renown, O Lord, through all generations."