

Pentecost 15
31/8/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 3:1 – 15

Ps 105

Romans 12:9 - 21

Matthew 16:21 - 28

The call of Moses: God and human agency

There is a TV advertisement on the ABC at the moment that highlights the importance of people's stories. Stories have been central to our identity, and to our understanding of life. All of us have many stories to tell but when it comes to explaining who we are there is perhaps one above all that is foundational. Through some event, gracious and generous, or painful and grievous we may have learned that a particular story drives us, accounts for our outlook on the world, and is the measure of our sense of meaning and purpose in life.

You may already be thinking about what your foundational story is. And we know that nations, states and organizations also have foundational stories that explain their history and stance in the world. For example this week Barack Obama chose the 45th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech as the day for his nomination address. He identified himself with a piece of public theology, which put forth a social agenda of biblical proportions especially for the African American people. And it had profound implications for the whole nation. If the subject itself at the time was not enough to make it a foundational, the events following have embedded it in history for all time.

The Call of Moses is a foundational story for Jews and Christians. If we needed any reminder of this, we only have to ask why the image of the burning bush is in the centre of our rose window. From this story we learn fundamental things about the nature of God, how God regards the world, and the nature of the divine-human relationship.

The seventeenth century scientist Blaise Pascal's understanding of God was revolutionised when he came to see that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob was not the abstract, impersonal reality philosophers talk about. The God of biblical story is a compassionate presence who looks mercifully on the suffering of the people, intervenes on their behalf and calls one of us to lead them to freedom. But this power amongst us is a transcendent presence, an influence we comprehend, which is nevertheless beyond our control. The burning bush, surrounded as it is in our tradition by the words "burning but not consumed", has become a seminal emblem for this transcendent presence and power.

The real wonder is not the shrub, but the presence of God. This is the unknown one who invited Abraham and Sarah into a relationship and showed blessing and compassion to their family. For weeks we have been reading stories about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but only now is the one who was present to them named. It is fundamental that the presence itself gives us that name. In biblical thinking name

giving carries with it the idea of having power over the one named, as in Adam who names the animals at the Creation. That God gives the name is a sign of God's transcendence. The power of naming God belongs only to God, and Jews still refuse to utter the name. God is present, but God cannot be co-opted by us.

However disconcerting or even terrifying the encounter with the burning bush may have been for Moses, the existence of this name is liberating news. Amongst all the names there are in world, there is a name for God, which is gifted to us and signifies nearness. People of faith have something to go on. It is possible for us to say whom we are talking about. But there are ways in which even with all that we can learn from this name, God remains out of our reach. Moses' quest for clarity brought some result, but an element of mystery remained.

Moses is told I AM WHO I AM. This name is a verb: an action word. The Holy One of Israel is an active, living being: The Living God. And the bush that burned and is not consumed suggests that here is one whose energies cannot be contained, and are not subject to decay.

I AM WHO I AM is a verb that is difficult to translate: it could mean I CAUSE TO BE, or it could mean I AM WHO WILL CERTAINLY BE (WITH YOU). [Buber/Wallace]. This is the God of action who comes near to us seeking our good. Later this one comes to be known as the Creator God. This is no mountain djinn, no spirit of sea rocks or sand: this is the source of all. And that this name is virtually untranslatable and regarded as unpronounceable is foundational for understanding our God relationship.

“Go down, Moses, way down to Egypt's land. Tell old Pharaoh, let my people go!” Moses' encounter with the transcendent power revolutionised his life. Midian was a peaceful place. But now he is challenged to put aside his instincts towards comfort and safety and return to the politics and racial tensions of Egypt to speak truth to power and win freedom for the people. “Who am I to do this task?” he asks. Dare we hear in this a suggestion from Moses that it was within the Living God's own power to fulfil this task without human help? A foundational element of this story is that the transcendent power works precisely through human agency. God reaches out to co-opt us. We are graciously invited to participate in the liberating, restoring, humanising work of God in the world. But there is a cost. In order to accomplish God's work, Moses has to resolutely set his face to go to the place where there is suffering and hurt, and enter into the struggle. Going there was not his idea; it went against his natural instincts. But the promise is he will not do this alone. The transcendent power will be his strength and even Pharaoh the death-dealing king is not to be feared.

Christians find in Moses a person who prefigures Jesus Christ, and the Exodus is read as laying out the pattern for a new witness to God's liberating, redemptive work accomplished for us in him. Jesus was called to go to Jerusalem, the place of tension, conflict and death. In the Gospel we see that Jesus' sayings about bearing the cross were too sharp and demanding for Peter who cried out that this must never happen. Peter's domesticated imagination had not grasped the fullness of the power that moved Jesus. And he did not fully understand the way to life. Jesus went to Jerusalem to challenge all the forces that were against God. The Resurrection became

the sign that the life and power of God that was in Jesus could not be consumed by the powers of death. I am the Resurrection and the Life, he said. This power turned Peter's life around and he found the road to freedom.

The curious thing about our foundational story is that the way to gain life is to be willing to lose it. There is no freedom except through living for God, which involves going to Egypt the place of un-freedom. There is no life except through living for God, which involves going to Jerusalem the place of the Cross.

Christian people are called to take up their cross, which means to refuse to live according to the powers that held Egypt and Jerusalem in their grip. They are called to challenge the powers of slavery, injustice and the death, because God works through human agency, inspired by gracious, merciful love. But Christians do not do this on their own, or in their own strength. The one who seeks us out and makes the presence of transcendent power known to us calls us to do this. We are invited to go forward in company with that power: God who is with us. Amen.