

Pentecost 23
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Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 33:12 – 23

Psalm 99

I Thessalonians 1:1 - 10

Matthew 22:15 – 22

Moses and Mysticism: grace for a stiff-necked people

During the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games the teams from the nations parade in, following their flag. As each group reaches the dais the flag bearer lowers the flag in respect, and in honour of the Olympic ideals. It is said that one nation consistently refuses to lower their flag at this point.

In Exodus 33 Israel is described as a stiff-necked people. This does not mean the people were subject to a special medical condition that made being a Jewish Chiropractor a lucrative professional choice! Stiff necked is a metaphor drawn from the experience of working with domestic animals. The ox “stiffens its neck” when it refuses direction, and “turns a stubborn shoulder” when offered the yoke. Applied to people “stiff-necked” is a metaphor for unbending rebellion, such as Israel offered God in the wilderness. It stands for unteachableness, expressed in idolatry, apostasy, and the refusal to heed the word of the prophets. A stiff-necked people refused to bow and take direction from God.

The conversation between Moses and God took place in the light of God having said the divine presence would be withdrawn because the people were stiff necked. Yet the conversation gives a picture of uniquely close relationship between Moses and God in which Moses has a lot of agency. He called God to come clean and honour their relationship, and the promise to journey with the people: “*If I have found favour in your sight, consider too that this nation is your people*” [v 13]. It is the role of leader to look beyond his own needs to pray to God for the people, and Moses prevailed. God was not stiff-necked. Everything Moses asked God agreed to do.

But it did not stop there. Moses pointed out that unless the divine presence travelled with Israel, there would be nothing to distinguish it from the nations. If God refused to be Israel’s companion, the name of the Living God would mean nothing in the world. God was challenged to be true to the covenant, and what transpires has implications for the church today.

Despite the fickleness of the Church, its leadership has a role in tirelessly calling on God to be God for us. And this narrative suggests that the witness of the people of God in the world is nothing apart from God’s choice to be God for us and with us. Our impact in the world as the people of God has no credibility of its own accord. It arises because God chooses to go with us. This is a gift of grace to us not something we generate.

Ironically the witness of the people of God is all the more powerful because God chooses to travel with a fickle, rebellious mob that constantly resists the call to faith

and obedience. Who stray after other gods, and seek to live life on their own terms, rather than to live in their promised rest. You could say the mystery of God is that God chooses to veil the divine presence in the church in spite of the way it behaves!

In the next part of the conversation Moses acted like a person who has tasted something delicious, and now wanted a whole meal of that food. Or as Augustine might have said: "... he attained the eternal wisdom, which abides beyond all things... and then wished for nothing else...". "*Show me your glory*" said Moses. He asked for a tangible sign of the presence of God: a deeper fellowship, the kind of seeing in which nearness was experienced as nearness. Moses wanted a relationship that had passed beyond blind trust to become a relationship of intimate intercourse, in which you know that you are known.

The scene in which Moses is held safely in the cleft of a rock while the God passes by and shouts the sacred name would make a wonderful Arthur Boyd style painting. There is nothing in the text to say that God cannot be seen. The assumption is that one cannot see God and live, which is why Moses' request is only partially granted. He will see the glow of God's splendour after God has passed. He will hear the sound of the sacred name echo through the hills but will not be exposed to the awesome, terrifying presence of God. It is the character of God that is exposed to him, and there is grace in the fact that God's own hand is used to prevent Moses from seeing the divine face. This is a hint that the goodness that passed by Moses is essentially merciful and good, a sign that the face of God does indeed look on the world with kindness.

We live through stories and this narrative gives us access to a fundamental idea about God. God allowed the divine face to shine for Moses, so that from then on, in some small way, it would be possible to distinguish between God and the world. God is distinct. The presence of God is not arbitrary. But it is presence.

The Good News is the power of salvation is present for us in the world. It has been seen and experienced, and we can live in contemplation of that fact. But the Godhead refused to allow itself to be fully comprehended: God chose to favour Moses, but God chose to remain God. And this enables us to give to God what is rightly God's to have in the world.

Moses glimpsed the back parts of God. We should not pass too quickly over the point that it is after God has passed by that Moses saw. A hint of nearness is given but God is recognised afterwards. This is often how it is for us. On reflection we can more easily recognise where God has been than we can see at the time. That it was the back parts of God is also a sign that God goes before us: God is present as the God of the future, leading us into life.

Although the Bible does not have much to offer those who seek a mystical version of the faith we cannot avoid the fact that there is mysticism in this story. Mysticism is a word chosen in the seventeenth century to describe something hidden or protected in relation to faith, especially in the intense, experiential encounter with the transcendent Other.

Protestants have mostly been suspicious of Mysticism. In our zeal for correct

doctrine we tend to leave little room for the side of faith that is not immediately obvious and explainable to the reader. But just as not everything can be explained doctrinally, not everything can be described as mystical or having a mystical side. Mysticism is not an alternative to doctrinal Christianity but part of it. What mysticism offers hardline doctrinal Christianity is a question about the limits to belief, keeping the boundary open to the fact that our best doctrine may be describing only the near edge of something, we can hardly grasp. What doctrinal Christianity offers mysticism is a question of where its experience lines up with what the tradition teaches. Does the God whom we have come to know in experience have the same character of the God who has chosen to know us from times past?

Christians believe the face of God was turned towards us in Jesus Christ. As Moses was placed in a rock and covered with God's hand, so Jesus was placed in a tomb of rock. After that his friends caught a passing glimpse of God's glory. And as the story of the Emmaus Road shows, he journeyed with the two (probably a man and a woman), but once he was recognized at the breaking of bread he was lost to their sight. With great joy they returned home to say that afterwards they were able to see where the transcendent power had been with them on the road.

There is a pattern here: God is among us, but God is distinct from us. God is near but God is transcendent. The miracle is that, though hidden to our sight, God is still present to us in Word and Sacrament, Bread and Wine, and continues to journey with a bunch of fickle rebels, who doubt and desert, and yet find themselves surrounded by eternal love. This is grace for a stiff-necked people. And we must not miss the point of this tremendous truth: that's us!