

Pentecost 17
28/08/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 3:1- 15

Psalms 105

Romans 12:9 - 21

Matthew 16:21 - 28

The bush that burned but was not consumed and walking the way of the cross

The image of the burning bush at the centre of our church's rose window was a popular choice amongst the Reformed family of churches. It was first adopted by French Calvinists (the Huguenots) in 1583 and the Church of Scotland, one of the three churches celebrated in the founding of Union Memorial Church in 1859, chose the words *nec tamen consumebatur* (yet it was not consumed) as its motto.

Moses was not searching for God when he saw the bush. He was going about his mundane business of minding sheep when he drew aside to look at something unusual. The Burning Bush fascinated him as it has fascinated us and produced many attempted explanations. Some think Moses hallucinated, others say the sun shone through the bush, and others tell of a bush in the region that excretes volatile substances that under certain conditions will ignite and die down without burning the plant. None of these add to the story or take us to its core.

In the history of religions fire has had multiple associations with the transcendent presence of God. The Bible itself uses it in the symbol of the pillar of fire that led the people through the Wilderness. The prophet Ezekiel spoke of wheels of fire, Isaiah was cleansed by a coal of fire, there are thrones of fire, creatures of fire and angels of fire, the most exalted of which, the cherubim, glows with fire. All of this is an attempt to put into words something that is beyond our grasp and difficult to articulate.

The mystical traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church speak of transcendent realities in this way. There is *created* fire or light that is earthly in origin, and *uncreated* fire or light that is Divine in origin. St Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) says that uncreated light is "fire truly divine, ...fire uncreated and invisible, without beginning and immaterial" such as the light seen around Jesus at the Transfiguration [Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* p 66]. This tradition says the bush was not consumed because it represents the fact that Moses was permitted to see a vision of God's *Uncreated Energies*, God's Glory, manifest as light.

The theological point is that present to mortals in the bush is the irresistible being of God, whose creative energies cannot be contained and are not subject to decay or deterioration. This is God, who is wholly other and cannot be grasped by us, and yet condescends to come close to us as light to care and to challenge. This is the God who, in the Aaronic Blessing and in the Psalms, is described as having a face that shines upon us, and does so for our good.

From the centre of the flame that he was afraid to gaze upon Moses heard a voice. In what follows Moses is presented with the ancient equivalent to a calling card in which God identifies himself as the one who was known to the forebears, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This God is no General Principle of the Universe. This is the so far unnamed God who has been with the people in ages past, whom they had trusted with their life.

As Moses' resistance continues God takes him into even greater intimacy by giving him the sacred name. In Biblical thinking to know the name of a person is to have access to their power and to understand their fundamental reality. That is why, in biblical times, the name of God is not spoken, because mortals cannot control God.

But here Moses is given the name. He did not invent it. It was not a trendy human concept for God. It was a gift of God to him and a token of a real relationship. The name is based on the verb "to be", translated as **I Am who I Am**. The name is unpronounceable and virtually untranslatable, which means that like the fire in the bush it is beyond our grasp, and yet has entered the grammar of our discourse.

The central meaning that emerges from this exchange is that the quality of the God of the ancestors was not his Being, or his Existing. It was this God's **Active Being on their behalf**. Scholars suggest the meaning of the name can be summed up as **I will be there for you**. The God who addressed Moses has a compassionate heart: the cry of the oppressed people has been heard and understood. Moves are already afoot to deliver the people into a better place. And in this action God chose to work with a human agent - who was called to lead the people out of a dark context into freedom.

Moses was not a volunteer for this task, nor was this mission born of his personal ambition. This hero of the faith in the making did not set out to make a name for himself. He was reluctant and made excuses, but this did not deter God. Many called by God have felt the same. Who wants their life disturbed? Wouldn't it be better to stay with the status quo?

While Moses the stutterer was not called to be a philosopher or a preacher in him there was no gap between worship and mission. His worshipful encounter with the burning bush led straight to a confrontation with Pharaoh's Court because the God who addressed him is not the keeper of the status quo. God calls people to challenge leaders; to break down barriers and set people free to live as they are intended in the new future that is on offer to them, a future not born of the ideals of kings or Empires.

God's revelation to Moses shook him to the core. His life was never the same again! He had to relocate and take on new tasks with no guarantee that he would succeed in this mission. The one thing he was given to rely on was the assurance that the God whose name meant **I will be there for you** would be true to his name and share the risk and the suffering of the people.

The journey Moses was called to is similar to the one that presents itself in the Gospel call to take up our cross and follow, leaving self behind for the sake of Another. Christians find in Moses a person who prefigures Jesus Christ, and the Exodus is read as providing 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 protested that this must never happen. Peter's domesticated imagination had not grasped the fullness of the power that moved Jesus. And he did not yet 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.

In Moses' call, and the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, we touch on a key element in our foundational story that contradicts human wisdom, because it has divine origin - the principle 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.

As we confront the future, with a cracked and crumbling building, and are beset by assaults upon us in other ways, our texts remind us that 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 forsake self and challenge the powers of untruth, enslavement, injustice and the death. Christians are called to do this because God - the living God - works through human agency, inspired by gracious, merciful love. But Christians are not to 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. So be it for us, and for all God's people.
