

The God who called Moses

It was just another day at the office for Moses – or at least another day working as a shepherd out in the wilderness: nothing unusual or untoward, just the familiar daily routine of guarding the sheep. But on this day, however, something catches Moses' eye in the shimmering heat: a bush on fire, flames engulfing it - maybe Moses had seen this before out in the furnace of the desert. Except that somehow this is different. This bush burns and yet is not consumed. And there, in the flames, Moses discerns a figure – is this his imagination playing tricks? – and as he approaches the bush to investigate, a voice speaks, summoning him to remove his sandals for he is standing upon holy ground. And Moses hears these words: 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And we are told that Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

It is a defining moment in the history of God's people, the moment when Moses encounters the God of his ancestors who calls him to liberate his people who are suffering as slaves under the cruel regime of Pharaoh. And to be so called obviously came as a huge surprise to Moses. At this point, after all, Moses is a fugitive, fleeing justice, having murdered one of the Egyptians who were enslaving his people. He is in the wilderness, literally and metaphorically, an outcast from his people – and yet God appears to him and calls him.

And today I want first to consider what we learn here about God, the God who Moses encounters at this bush, for of course this is the same God that calls you and me today. And I want to begin at the end of our passage, where God has told Moses that he is to be the leader of his people, and he's to go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the slaves. And Moses is clearly troubled at this prospect and enquires after God's name. What is Moses to say when the Israelites ask who has sent him? And there follows this moment of profound self-revelation by God. 'God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you.'"

So what is all that about? What does it mean, 'I AM WHO I AM'. The original Hebrew word here is 'Yahweh' and given the fluidity of the Hebrew language it can also mean, 'I will be who I will be'. And what kind of name is that? Well, the fact is that it is not a name at all, it's more an avoidance of answering the question. It's a bit like when a child asks their mother when dinner will be ready and the mother replies, 'It'll be ready when it's ready.' That's all you need to know! What are we to make of this? Imagine you are doing some on-line dating, and you are put in touch with someone who, when asked to describe themselves, say, 'well, I am who I am and I will be who I will be!' Would you trust them with a date?

Well, what we touch on here is the elusive nature of God, one whose identity must always be cloaked in holiness and in mystery. In ancient times to know someone's name was to give you a hold over them, power over them, control over them. And God's name is too holy to be uttered because we can have no hold upon God. God is transcendent: far beyond us and ultimately he is who he is – or even she is who she is for even to speak of God in male terms is to try to impose our categories upon God. God is beyond every creaturely classification, slipping out of every conceptual straightjacket. Ultimately all that God will say of himself is 'I am who I am' and 'I will be who I will be.' And we will always try to make God in our own image, to make God conform to how we would like God to be: that is the nature of idolatry, and the human heart, as the great French reformer John Calvin described it, is an idol factory.

This, however, creates a great dilemma. As human beings we must conceptualise God. We must speak of God. We are called, like Moses, to respond to God – but how do we do that with a God is so elusive? How can we know and understand God when God is so far beyond our knowing and understanding? I love the story of the 13th century theologian Thomas Aquinas, one of the very greatest theologians in the whole history of the church. Aquinas' voluminous and hugely influential account of the Christian faith, the *Summa Theologica* is one of the great intellectual works of history. Well, it is said that in his last days, after devoting his life to writing profound theology, Thomas was celebrating Mass when he seemed to be caught up in a kind of ecstasy. And because of what he saw,

he refused to write any more, declaring, ‘I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw to me’. And so the *Summa Theologica* would remain uncompleted. In other words, all Thomas’ attempts to write and to speak of God paled into insignificance when he experienced God’s burning reality. His writings were but straw – which, unlike the bush the Moses saw, would be burnt up when Thomas saw God face to face. For all his thousands upon thousands of words about God Aquinas, like Moses, came up against the God who says simply ‘I AM’. Yahweh. I AM WHO I AM AND I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. And there is surely a word here for us who profess belief in this God. Beware of making God in our own image. Beware of belittling God, of cutting him down to a manageable size. Beware of draining him of holiness and mystery and of claiming to comprehend him. God grant us humility and reverence before a God who we might like to pin down and define but who always slips our grasp.

Yet having said all that, God may be far beyond our understanding and our grasp, but that does not mean that God is absent and removed from us. It does not make God distant and inaccessible. Far from it. And here we return to our passage and we note four things God says about himself in it. Listen again to verse 7 of our reading: ‘Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt: I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians...”’ Think for a moment of the four verbs in that statement: ‘I have observed the misery of my people... I have heard their cry... I know their sufferings... I have come down...’ Get that? ‘I have observed’, ‘I have heard’, ‘I know’, ‘I have come down’. Here is a God whose senses are attuned to his creation, a God who is alert to what is going on down here. Here is a God who knows every tear, a God whose ears and mind are open to every sigh, to every cry of anguish, to every instance of injustice. Here is a God who observes and hears and knows... and who acts, who comes down. And as Christians, of course, we cannot read these words without being carried forward centuries to when God again observed and heard and knew and who came down – in person, in the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth. Here God comes down in our skin and we need not hide our faces as Moses did, for here we meet him face to face.

Well, this brings us to two last, brief points. This God who identifies himself as Yahweh also describes himself, as we noted earlier, another way. He describes himself – twice in fact, in verse 6 and in verse 15 - as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. In other words, beyond the exalted I AM, beyond the I AM WHO I AM AND I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE, God is also the God of Moses’ forefathers: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And he might have added Sarah, and Rebekah and Rachel. And here we encounter these two aspects of God. Yes, on the one hand he is Yahweh, I AM: too holy, too transcendent, too elusive to be named. But he is also the God who has come down and become part of Abraham’s story, and Isaac and Jacob’s stories. His sovereign, transcendent life comes down and interweaves with theirs. And the beautiful thing is that we could add our names to that list: the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of mother Mary, the God of Jesus, the God of Mary Magdalene, the God of Lance, the God of Sally, the God of Andreas... add your own name to the list, for this God comes down to dwell in you – whoever you are – and to become part of your story.

And so to my final point. There is one other thing that God says about himself in this passage. To this fugitive Moses, this murderer, this outcast, this frightened Moses summoned to confront Pharaoh, God promises in verse 12, ‘I will be with you.’ Do not be afraid of Pharaoh, for I will be with you. This is God’s great commitment to Moses, and to all God’s people – including you and me: the promise of his presence with us.

So hear the good news in this passage. Listen to God’s Word to Moses and the Israelites and to you and to me, to each and every one of us: I observe you, I hear you, I know you, and I come down to you – and I will be with you. And God knows, that is a promise that we need to hear today. God grant that, like Moses, we may respond in trust and in obedience. Amen.

Almighty and eternal God,
we gather to worship you,
the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob,
and the God of Sarah, and Rebekah and Rachel,
and the God of Jesus of Nazareth.
We praise you, the God far beyond us,
exalted and sovereign,
before whom the angels veil their faces
and we take off our shoes, for in approaching you
we stand on holy ground.
And we praise you, God of Jesus Christ
in whom you have come down to us,
sharing your life and our lives with us.
And we praise you God the Holy Spirit
who burns like a fire and who longs to
inflame our lives with your fierce love.
And we come into your presence,
from our ordinary lives,
and we hide our faces for we acknowledge
that we cannot gaze upon your holiness.
We confess that we are part of a world
which has fallen far short of your purposes,
a world which is groaning and crying
because we oppress one another,
and we turn in on ourselves rather than
opening up in love to you and to one another.
So we turn to you, confessing our sins –
and we find you reaching out to us in grace,
and promising the blessings of forgiveness,
and summoning us to share in your task of
bringing liberation to a world in captivity.
Call us once again, loving God,
and give us grace to respond,
our feet shod with the Gospel of peace.
We pray in Jesus' name, and in the words he taught us...