

HIW 21.01.2018

## **“Moments of Divine Grace” (Burning Bush – Transfiguration)**

### **Exodus Ch. 3, vv. 1-15; The Gospel according to Mark, Ch. 9, vv. 2-9**

Ex. 3; v.14; “I AM WHO I AM”.

Mk 9, v.5: “It is good for us to be here.”

It doesn't seem to be too late to wish you all a Happy New Year. Our church in Arnum is holding its New Year Reception today, which we have had to miss. And have we really got used to its being 2018? So used to it that we are not in danger of writing 2017 when we fill in a form? Okay, Christmas is over: we have taken down the tree, put away the decorations, decided where to stow away the presents (those we haven't already eaten or drunk) and put the furniture back in its normal position. But in the church calendar we are still in the “Epiphany” period, and “Epiphany” definitely still belongs to the Christmas season. Anyone who has any contact with the church should know that the festival on 6 January commemorates the coming of the Wise Men – or the Three Kings, if you prefer the traditional but non-Biblical version: their coming to Jesus with their offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh. So far, so good: but it is worth noting what “Epiphany” really means, namely “appearance”. This does not, however, refer to the appearance of the Wise Men at Jesus's mangerside (or celebrate the fact that they managed to arrive at all, a few days late as they seem to have been, possibly as a result of the unreliability of the King Herod Camel Service between Jerusalem and Bethlehem). No, it's the other way round: the appearance or revelation is that of Christ to the Wise Men, taken to symbolise the wider non-Jewish world, and their acknowledgement of him as Son of God.

Nowadays the word “epiphany” is used outside the religious context as well, to refer to a sudden and unexpected realisation or enlightenment which brings a new and deeper understanding of a problem or situation, and is thus life-changing for the person who experiences it. But then any such life-changing event will inevitably often be felt to be religious in nature, and to bring a realisation or confirmation of faith.

Sometimes, shortly before I am due to preach at Hannover International Worship, I am in a bit of a panic as to whether I will be able to find anything

very much worth saying, and that will fill twenty minutes, about the selected text. But at least twice, fortunately, God has then spoken to me, not quite as he did out of the Burning Bush or on the Mount of the Transfiguration, but with the voice of BBC Radio 4. This time it was a service of worship broadcast on New Year's Eve, in which the former Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, speaking on the theme of "Responding to God's Grace", played the role of Aaron to my Moses, finding words for what I wanted to say, but couldn't formulate myself, to bring together the stories in today's two readings, that of the Burning Bush and that of the Transfiguration of our Lord. Bishop Jones started by quoting two writers, the novelist Evelyn Waugh and the journalist A. A. Gill, so I will quote his quotes: "Evelyn Waugh said that everyone has in his or her life a moment when they are open to divine grace: a time when we become aware, in spite of all the troubles in the world, that there is a God, and that his love is within our reach. A. A. Gill once wrote: 'Faith is like a piece of string that disappears up into the clouds, and every now and then we feel a pull on it.'" Bishop Jones himself then commented: "Spiritual episodes like this don't happen all the time; but from time to time the unexpected jolts us, shakes us up, making us more open to the possibility that there might be more to this world than we can get from our five senses." These words made me think of today's two stories in terms of the people involved, Moses on the one hand and Peter, James and John on the other, experiencing their epiphanies, receiving a spiritual jolt or shock that was outside their normal experience, even as believers; feeling a pull on that string that disappears into the clouds.

Let us look at the Moses story first. Moses is a refugee in Midian. Moved by the suffering of his enslaved people in Egypt, he has murdered an Egyptian overseer whom he had seen mishandling a Hebrew labourer [Ex.2,11-15] – putting it in modern terms, one might say he has killed a concentration camp guard – and has fled for his life into the Sinai desert, where he has been granted asylum by the priest and probable tribal chief of Midian, Jethro [Ex.2,16-22]. Moses clearly views his exile as permanent: he has married Jethro's daughter and started a family [Ex.2,21-22], with no sign of intending to return to Egypt. Ac-

According to other references in the Bible he had been in Midian for “forty years” [Ex.7,7; Acts 7,29] when the Burning Bush incident took place; I doubt if this figure is intended to be exact, I see it rather as simply representing a very long time, a generation, long enough for the king and “all the men who wanted to kill you” in Egypt to have died, as indeed they had [Ex.4,19].

We can take it that Moses, who had grown up in the household of Pharaoh, was an educated, informed and intelligent man – his later performance as leader of the Israelites during the Exodus is sufficient demonstration of that. I wonder how he occupied his mind during these long years of exile, what he thought about during the long days out in the desert or semi-desert, looking after his father-in-law’s sheep. Moses’ father-in-law Jethro was a priest of Midian. I can find little evidence of what kind of religion it was he served. Later, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Book of Moses, the Book of Numbers, the Midianites are implicated in seducing some of the Israelites to worship Baal [Num.25,1]; but Moses seems to have found it quite possible to live in Jethro’s household and with his family while still retaining his faith in the God of Israel.

And then one day, alone in the desert with Jethro’s sheep, on the holy mountain variously known as Horeb or Sinai, he sees a bush which appears to be burning but is not consumed by the fire. He is drawn to it: by curiosity, but apparently also by a sense that this is something outside the natural order: maybe by a sort of intuition that in it there is a message addressed to him. And his response to that intuition, his willingness to come closer rather than to run away, displays an openness to things that are outside the range of his experience: a readiness to feel the pull on that piece of string hanging down from the clouds.

And out of the bush, God speaks to him. He calls him by name – “Moses! Moses!” At this, many of us will automatically think of the familiar verse from the Book of Isaiah: “I have called you by name, you are mine” [Is.43,1 RSV]. That text does not, as one might at first think, describe God’s mastery over the one whose name he calls, but rather his care for him or her: the passage goes on “I have redeemed you – When you pass through the waters, I will be with you – When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned” [Is.43,1-2]. But the God

that Moses experiences on this occasion does indeed seem to be a masterful God. First he commands Moses to remove his shoes in recognition that the place where he is standing is a holy place, that he is in the presence of the divine. Shoes, being constantly in contact with the dirt of the ground, and whatever else we may happen to tread in, were symbolic of impurity and uncleanness, as they still are in the Middle East today. We tend not to make that association; but we might well think of the fact that shoes represent protection for our feet, and that to renounce our shoes is to make ourselves vulnerable, to lay ourselves open to the influences that press upon us from outside.

And then God reveals who he is, and immediately tells Moses what he wants: he has a job for him. “Go: I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” No less than that. And he is saying this to the fugitive murderer Moses, a man perhaps spoilt by a luxurious upbringing in the royal palace, a man who has run away into the desert and there let his undoubted talents go to waste for the period of an entire generation. Moses replies to God: “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” We might well echo that with “Who indeed?” But God’s ways are not our ways; God looks at people differently from the way we do, and sees into the depths of their hearts [Ps.139,1].

One might easily feel that it would be an obvious approach to this text to take up the idea of fire as a metaphor, and speak of the fire springing over from the burning bush into the heart of Moses, who would burn with it for the rest of his days. But actually it’s not as easy as that. Moses by no means catches fire immediately; rather, he comes up with one objection after another. He does not respond like Isaiah, who in his vision in the temple hears the voice of the Lord saying “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”, and immediately answers “Here am I! Send me!” [Is.6,8] – without even knowing what it is that God wants to send him to do. No, Moses appears more like Jonah, who is commanded by God to go to Ninevah and preach against its wickedness [Jon.1,2], but instead boards a ship to take him as far as possible in the opposite direction, until he is brought back by the “great fish” [Jon.1,17]. First of all, Moses is shameless

enough to demand that God should reveal his Name to him – even though, as we can read a couple of chapters further on [Ex.6,3], this was something that God had never done before, not even to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But now, probably to Moses' utter astonishment, he reveals it to him. Then, in the chapter following our reading, Moses asks what to do if the people won't believe him, and is empowered to perform miracles [Ex.4,1-9]; next he insists that he lacks eloquence and the power of persuasion [Ex.4,10-11], and is told to draw on the skills of his brother Aaron [Ex.4,14-16]; and finally, unable to think of any further arguments, he simply says "Please send someone else" [Ex.4,13].

How human! There is not much there to compare with a fire that does not burn itself out. And yet it is at this moment that the new Moses comes into being, the one who will lead his people out of Egypt and through the desert and establish the Hebrew religion, and who will talk to God on Mount Sinai and receive the Ten Commandments; so that Moses, even if he is not exactly a flaming torch, is not a candle in the wind either. Rather, he appears to be a kind of slow fuse which is difficult to light, but which once alight will keep burning through thick and thin.

I see the key to his transformation as lying in the revelation of God's name. Calling someone by name, as God called Moses by name - and has called us all, as in the quotation from Isaiah I have already mentioned [Is 43,1 RSV] - means really knowing them, and not only their name but their nature as well. And nowadays, when we no longer feel that God needs a name as if to distinguish him from other gods, we will understand God's revelation of his name as a revelation of his nature: "I AM WHO I AM", expressing the absolute autonomous existence of God, as *the one* who truly exists; or alternatively – since it is impossible to translate the Hebrew Name of God into either English or German in a way that covers all its connotations – "I AM WHO I WILL BE", or "I WILL BE WHO I AM", expressing God's unchanging nature and his faithfulness, as the one who will always be there as helper and deliverer; or "I AM HE WHO CAUSES TO BE", the one who is at the beginning of all being, the creator and maintainer of everything that is. – I have to rely on my Bible Comment-

ary for these explanations, since I do not know any Hebrew myself and so am not able to develop any ideas of my own about this matter.

Now I would like to turn to our second reading, the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus from Mark's Gospel. I have often thought that this report, although it is recounted by all three of the synoptic Evangelists – Matthew, Mark and Luke – sits rather uneasily in the Gospel narrative. It is the only time before his Resurrection when Jesus is not merely addressed or referred to, but actually appears, as the Son of God, rather than the Son of Man. In view of the magnitude of this, I find it curious that the whole episode is so brief, occupying a mere eight or nine verses. I attribute this to the fact that the witnesses, Peter, James and John, themselves couldn't make out what it was they were witnessing – as is evidenced by Peter's clumsy intervention with his rather nonsensical proposal to build shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. (The Evangelist adds the comment "For he did not know what to say", just to make sure we get the point.)

Nevertheless, we must be grateful to Peter for also coming out with his statement "It is good for us to be here." That it certainly was, for this too was clearly an epiphanic experience: one in which Jesus is revealed to the world – in this case represented by the three Apostles – as the Son of God. And it is certainly good for us too to have this episode related in the Gospels. Note that in Mark's account at least, it is only Jesus who is transfigured, and not Moses and Elijah as well: so that the other two, who represent respectively the Law and the Prophets, the two main pillars of Jewish religion, are relativised in relation to the One who represents their fulfilment. And my feeling is that that the proper way to read the words of God that the Apostles hear from the cloud, just as Moses heard the voice from the burning bush, is with the emphasis "***This*** is my Son, whom I love. Listen to ***him!***" Jesus, the transfigured one, is my son, not Moses or Elijah, though they too are my servants. And if in doubt, it is what *he* says, rather than what *they* say, that should guide you. One might say that the other two, or the legacies that they left behind in the world, are transfigured by the person and the Gospel of Jesus. Is it far-fetched to see here a seed planted in the hearts of the Apostles that they will remember when they have to deal with the

question of whether the young Christian church is to be bound by the Mosaic law, with all its prohibitions and restrictions? And as for Elijah: can we not point to the authority of this word of God, if we come to the conclusion that the way Elijah had the prophets of Baal slaughtered at the brook Kishon displayed an imperfect understanding (great prophet of the Lord though he was) of the way God wishes us to treat our – or his – enemies?

The Burning Bush and the Transfiguration, then, are just as much Epiphany stories as the story of the Wise Men from the East. But in the radio broadcast I quoted at the beginning, Bishop Jones, speaking very much still in the Christmas period, went on like this: “Such moments of divine grace, to use Evelyn Waugh’s phrase, are a mystery: there is no accounting for them, for the why and when or who should experience them. Such is the mystery of God in the world. The story of Christ’s birth is full of such mysterious moments, such as Wise Men travelling from east to west in search of a child born to be king. And as with many mysteries, the road is far from straightforward, and is strewn with obstacles. We hear the familiar Christmas stories, and imagine that if we had been there in the place of the Wise Men we too would have opened up our treasure chests and presented our gifts. We sing carols of these acts of grace, and think that we too would have worshipped and followed him. But I’m not sure that’s always the case. We can be stopped in our tracks by some moment of unexpected insight, and yet find all sorts of reasons for ducking the impact of what we’ve encountered.”

Bishop Jones was also able to describe a concrete example of this: the case of the celebrated art historian and television presenter Kenneth Clarke. One day he was in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence when, as he himself said, his whole being was irradiated by a kind of heavenly joy far more intense than anything he had experienced before. It lasted for several months. He was sure that he had felt the finger of God; but he made no effort to hold onto the experience. “My life was far from blameless,” he explained. “I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad; and perhaps after all it was a delusion. For I was in every way unworthy of receiving such a flood of grace.”

I am sure we can sympathise with that feeling. Many of us will have had similar excuses for not following the call of God more closely; and we have examples in the Gospels too: “First let me go and bury my father” [Lk.9,24], or “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come” [Lk.14,20] – yes, she might have thought I was going mad! And yet: how unspeakably sad that Kenneth Clarke should have decided not to take hold of the finger of God he had felt, because he felt unworthy! Who then should feel worthy? Moses the murderer and runner away? He instead understood the Name of God: I AM he who will always be there as your helper and deliverer. Or Peter, the denier? He didn’t understand what was going on on the Mount of the Transfiguration, but he instinctively knew one thing: “It is good for us to be here.” All unworthy as we are, let us remain alert for the pull on the string that signals such a moment of grace, and that links us, as it did them, to him who IS WHO HE IS, our creator and redeemer who knows us by name.