

Sermon by Dr Uta Blohm

Hannover International Worship 16th September 2018

Text: Exodus 32, 7 - 14

This morning we were allowed to follow the most intimate conversation we as human beings can have, a conversation between a human being and his or her God.

When choosing the readings I followed the lectionary of the United Reformed Church in England, simply because that is a church I used to work for when living in London.

Moses is searching out God in a very desperate but also an almost comical situation.

The people were dancing around a golden calf. How absurd.

A big party was happening. A fire had been lit. Dancing.

People were enjoying food and drinks. Where had that come from in the middle of a dessert?

Some people were enjoying themselves - but there was a growing sense that things were out of control.

Many people felt no longer safe, in particular those who were less physically strong.

Mothers were increasingly desperate trying to protect their children from predators.

How had it come to this? It is a long a story.

This was a group of people searching for a better life. Yes, they had experienced a lot of violence. Really they had been slaves. Their children had not been safe. Many people died in Egypt.

One day one of their own had come, Moses, who had grown up in high society. He had led them to this place in the dessert with the promise that they will reach the land of their ancestors.

God would be with them.

Yes, and they had made it thus far. It had been a miracle that they had been allowed to leave the country in the first place.

And it had been a miracle that the mighty Egyptian army had been unable to reach them.

But then Moses had disappeared for, well far too long.

Only Aaron, his deputy so to speak, his brother, had been left behind.

Whilst Moses was away things had gone out of control.

People felt just as unsafe as they had felt in Egypt.

There was nobody there to protect the vulnerable. A refugee camp is a lawless place.

Who could they turn to for help? Where was God?

Was there nobody there to put in place rules so they might all be able to survive?

Aaron had no answer either but he suggested - not wanting to admit how out of his depth he was – people give him their gold.

He asked the men to take away the gold from the women, their sons and daughters.

And is it not amazing that people still did have some precious possessions, ear rings?

Not every woman or youngster wanted to hand them in.

They had to be removed with force.

‘It is necessary to save us’.

‘Really?’

‘Yes, we are doing this to save ourselves.

You must give something’.

‘Really, don’t you think the gold might be useful later on?’

‘No, you must give it up’.

Was this required?

The gold was used to create a giant, yes what – a calf?

They cried: ‘these are our gods who brought you out of Egypt’.

Really? Had they not just created this statue themselves?

Did Aaron really think that a statue would help them?

How could he sink so low to make such promises?

When Moses sees what happened he prays.

Moses pleads.

Moses pleads with God to be forgiving, not to let go of his people.

This is quite an extra-ordinary story.

First of all. It is quite extra-ordinary ethically.

It is unusual for humans to say 'we did something wrong'.

No, more often than not we like to blame other people when things go wrong.

And no, we do not want to remember the sins of our past.

But who we are as human beings depends on how honest we can be with ourselves as individuals and as a group.

But here is a group of people, the Jewish people, who has in their history stories of their own sins. Most people prefer to tell idealized stories of their success.

These are the kind of stories nobody is interested in 2000 years later.

The Bible is a good book still read across the world.

Sadly, Christians have used Jewish self-criticism to turn that against Jews.

The two readings present somehow an odd choice.

What do we want to say?

God, as presented in the so called Old Testament, is a God of wrath but the God Jesus spoke about is a God of love and kindness?

It is not true though. When we study the so called Old Testament carefully we learn that God's mercy prevails over his wrath.

That is true in this story. God is merciful.

People may well have been aware of this and chosen these two passages to go alongside each other.

Anger in itself is not bad and can also be found in the New Testament. Jesus destroys the shops in the temple. The temple is supposed to be a house of prayer not merchandise. That is his criticism. Anger is important if life.

Our problem as human beings is that we are like fish who cannot believe that there is life outside the sea.

We only get glimpses of life outside our world.

We can get things wrong. We may create a golden calf to make us feel more comfortable.

Scripture helps us to perhaps get glimpses of the outside world. Hopefully.

But the words we have been hearing this morning are only a record of what happened between Moses and God.

Who wrote about this encounter?

Moses?

Scripture is no safety-net. There are no absolute answer other than perhaps a warning against creating a God.

But a hope that God is searching for us.

Abraham Heschel has written a Jewish philosophy titled as God's search for human beings – and a much thinner book: humans asking for God.

Are we here because God is searching us and not because we are looking for meaning? Maybe. Hopefully.

Yes, the Bible offers no safety net, only hope that God searches for us in this shitty place we live in where terrible things happen.

The hope that God is searching for us like a homemaker who pays great attention to detail.

The woman sweeps the house every corner until the coin is found. Most likely is this coin her safety net in case of a divorce. No wonder she is looking so carefully. Thank God for the homemakers of this world.

And an encouragement that God is waiting for us like a father waiting for a phone call from a son who has not been in touch for years.

During the week I stumbled across an article in Guardian, two years old admittedly. It talks about a prayer meeting in Jerusalem among Jews, Christians and Muslims. People in religious gear Catholic nuns, a woman rabbi, Muslims with head covering meet.

I think, that is quite an extra-ordinary event.

I have great respect when people are standing before their God.
After all Moses is important for all of us.

What would the world look like if we dared doing that more often?

