

A strange plant

Exod.3.1-6

The story we heard in our Old Testament reading is the beginning of what theologians call a 'theophany' - an appearance of God. They are pretty rare occurrences in the Bible - let alone in the history of mankind. And this one was going to be vitally significant for the people of Israel. Moses, this shepherd son-in-law of a Midianite priest, was about to be given the name of God - a sign of trust and honour which had been given to no-one else, and was then also going to be commissioned by God to undertake what seemed like an impossible task to him - to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt.

There is logic to this illogical happening. Moses was no leader, no orator - he says as much later on. How did he come to be convinced that he must take on the might of Pharaoh? There must have been something devastatingly powerful for him to be convinced that this was what God wanted from him - because although we only have his own evidence for this story, there is plenty of evidence for the result of this encounter with God - the Exodus was central to Jewish history and thinking, and remains so.

If we look at the story carefully, we see it is not quite the simple 'Moses saw a burning bush and heard God speaking to him'. It is a bit more subtle than that. He is getting on with his ordinary work of looking after the safety of a flock sheep when he is called to lead the flock of Israel to safety in the Promised Land. Do you hear a kind of pre-echo of the way Jesus tells the fishermen that they will no longer catch fish, but people? It is the same kind of setting. He is being set up to do the same job, but in a different way. The task is ultimately the same - to ensure safety and life as it ought to be. But it is in the source of everyday life the encounter begins for him - and is the same for us. We encounter God almost by surprise, not because we are looking for him.

Then we hear that he saw an angel of the Lord - an angel being a messenger, of course. They were a bit more angel-conscious in those days than we are. But maybe we can learn from them

to recognise that God speaks to us through other people, through things and events around us. And Moses is convinced this is so because there is a bush on fire. Now God and fire have been mixed up for ever - it probably springs from the primitive instinct to be afraid of uncontrollable fire: it has a divine strength and irresistible power. You remember that when he leads the children of Israel from Egypt, they are led by a pillar of fire at night. And the coming of God the Holy Spirit on the first disciples at Pentecost was marked by tongues of flame. So Moses is inclined to see this message as from God, because God and fire go together. He is then fascinated to find that the bush is on fire, but isn't burnt up. Now whether this is a supernatural thing, or whether there is a perfectly logical explanation (and there have been many - about seeing the setting sun through the bush, or a species of bush which has very bright red stems and so on) - that really doesn't matter. In the telling of the story, the point of the non-expiring bush fire is that it holds Moses' attention. That is another pointer to us. Lots of people get a glimpse of God, as it were - they see that maybe something is being said to them. But they don't have the stickability to follow it through. It is a bit like the seeds which fall on the hard ground in Jesus' parable. Moses needs to have his attention held. The bush achieves that.

It is only at that point that God's voice is heard. It takes attention on our part to hear God. We need to focus on him, or we can't hear. And God first of all just calls his name. There is no rushing into the deep matters that will come up. First of all they have to make ordinary contact. And it underlines that our dealing with God is personal. God is not yelling out of the bush to anyone who happened to be passing - it is about a personal thing between him and Moses. So it is with us. God deals with us as individuals. Moses recognises this and answers 'Here I am'.

At this point, there is a dramatic turn. Moses is told to take off his sandals, because this is holy ground. Now recognising holy ground is again something we are not so good at. I was trying to think when I have taken off shoes - apart from muddy ones at someone door. I have of course done so in going into a Mosque - but that is respect for other people's sensitivity rather than a sense of the holy. But I do remember taking off shoes to walk down the steps which lead into the Kidron Valley in Jerusalem - steps which are so old that they may well be the ones that Jesus walked on. That seemed very right. What right had I do galumph in heavy shoes over the place where Jesus had walked? There are other ways of showing a sense of the holiness of a place. It may just be a matter of a special kind of silence - a 'not wanting to speak' because of

the awesomeness of a place. Any place where we meet with God is holy ground - and therefore any place can be holy, for we can meet with God anywhere. The ground becomes holy because of what happens. And as we recognise the encounter, so the sense of holiness should grow.

With Moses reacting positively and spiritually as he does, God is then ready to reveal more about himself. He first of all says that he is the God of Moses' ancestors. There is nothing new when we meet with God. He is the same yesterday, today and for ever, as the New Testament says. So our encounter has to be in tune with the encounters people have had before. God leads us on to new discoveries about himself, but starts with what we already know about him. God is always the educator, the 'one who leads out' from the known to the unknown. That is why we are rooted in scripture and tradition. They keep us from the risk of inventing a new God.

And again Moses reaction is significant - he hides his face, because he is afraid to look at God. God's love for Moses and for his people is real and strong and will deliver them. But he does not become a mate, a chum. He is the eternal God of all power, and Moses doesn't presume a familiarity which gets that out of focus. It is a balance that we all have to struggle with - we need to know the closeness of God's love. But we need to remember that he is God.

And that is where our story ends this morning - but of course it was the beginning rather than the end of the story for Moses. But all that followed could not and would not have happened without this event we have been thinking about. And that is a pattern of encounter with God that can be re-told all through history. It is where people turn aside and find God in their everyday life, and take time to listen, and offer themselves to God, that God can begin to open their minds and their eyes to possibilities that seem impossible.

I am very fond of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's lines inspired by this story.

Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush aflame with God  
But only those who see take off their shoes  
The rest stand round and pluck blackberries.

It seems to me to be where we all have to challenge ourselves about our busy-ness and narrow-mindedness and earth-boundness. If Moses had been like we often are, he would have just plucked blackberries, and there would be no story to tell.