Sermon for 22nd in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:21-28

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The Bad News is that the famine is getting worse by the day; the Good News is that the food fights have stopped in the school canteen.

Our two readings today remind me of those Good news/Bad News jokes – although I doubt whether either Moses or Peter found them very amusing.

Moses received an unprecedented gift – he was allowed to approach God who appeared in the burning bush and to him was disclosed the divine name. This was a remarkable privilege, but what the implications of the divine name are, is a matter we shall return to later.

Moses had tried to defend his fellow Hebrews who were being treated like slaves by the Egyptians. By God’s providence, Moses had escaped the death penalty that pharaoh had decreed for all male Hebrew babies, and was now in a position of power and influence to intervene on behalf of his people.

Moses was provoked to precipitous action upon seeing the mistreatment of his compatriots and killed an Egyptian slave driver (Exodus 2:12), but his fellow Hebrews were suspicious and ungrateful and refused to rally to his rebellion. Perhaps they mistrusted him after being brought up in the royal household. He was not perceived as one of them and could not simply assume leadership of the people.

So Moses fled to Midian before pharaoh could have him arrested. His rebellion was a failure. He had tried a mighty work for God, in his own eyes, but his impetuosity had not served him well. Yet out in the desert wilderness of Midian, working as a shepherd for his extended family, God called Moses from the burning bush.

Now, instead of Moses thinking he was in charge and could promote himself to leadership – God was going to call him, commission him and equip him as leader of the people. Only someone truly appointed by God has the right to serve as leader of God’s people.

The Good News for Moses was that God had noticed his efforts to free his people, and God shared that desire, and God would agree to Moses being the leader of the people. All this would be just what Moses would have wanted to hear.

The Bad News was that Moses was sent back to face pharaoh, to the very place where he was a wanted man, where his own people had already rejected him and where his last attempt to free the people had ended in ignominious failure.

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There is a similar Good News/Bad News dynamic in Peter’s story today.

In the first half of Matthew 16, Peter had made a similarly momentous discovery about the name of God as was made by Moses. To Peter had been given the next and greater vision of God’s nature – in Jesus Christ. Now God has a new name and a new face – from henceforth all generations shall know the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob also by the name of Jesus the Christ.

It is upon this Rock of faith that the Church can be built. This is the Good News; Peter has discerned correctly who Jesus is and to him Jesus entrusts the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Then came the Bad News. Jesus reveals to Peter that his mission lies in going to Jerusalem and giving up his life. Peter doesn’t like that and naturally he wants to protect his Lord. But his well-intentioned resistance to Christ’s revelation is not God speaking through him, as it was a minute ago when he declared Jesus to be the ‘Son of God’, but is now the devil speaking through him. Poor Peter goes from hero to zero in a minute.

Peter is not wilfully rebelling against Jesus; he is reacting in a natural and human way and wishes to protect Jesus from harm. Yet the way of Christ is not the path of self-preservation, but of self-sacrifice and Peter must be prepared to walk that path too if he wishes to be a faithful disciple. Indeed, Jesus says all those who wish to follow him cannot do so by trying to preserve their life and their world; discipleship means for everyone the willingness to offer self in the service of others, the willingness to let go of their old world in order to embrace the new.

To his everlasting credit, Peter learned his lesson. He went on to make several more mistakes, such as denying he ever knew Christ during Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, but Jesus stuck by Peter and Peter came right. Ultimately, he took the same path as his Master which led to his own cross.

Moses and Peter were granted huge privileges of insight into the nature of God which had not been disclosed to the world before. Those extraordinary blessings were the necessary preparation for the enormous responsibility placed upon them. Moses was to lead the people to freedom through the desert to the Promised Land. Peter was to lead the people in the initial aftermath of Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension.

I am reminded of the saying:

“If you saw the size of the blessing coming, you would understand the magnitude of the battle you’re fighting.”

iii

So what do these two stories tell us about the nature of God?

God conceals as much as he reveals to Moses. “I am what I am” or “I will be what I will be” is an enigmatic name. The name is the ultimate expression of self -consciousness. To utter the personal pronoun “I” is the ultimate expression of personhood. As far as we know, we humans are the only creatures on this planet who also share a sense of self-awareness – creatures who can pronounce “I am”. In this way we are made in the image of God.

God is revealing himself to Moses, but at the same time retaining some enigma, distance and mystery. The name suggests that God may be revealing himself to Moses, but that God retains sovereign will. In an age when people believed names revealed and determined so much of personal destiny, the divine name expresses divine freedom to be what God will be. God hasn’t handed over to Moses everything there is to know. Many generations later, fellow Jews would claim to know more than Moses when they spoke of Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit, but even Trinitarian language cannot fathom the unfathomable mystery of God.

God is infinitely more than the human mind can conceive. Even in Jesus Christ who is the fullest revelation of the Father, we should maintain a sense of awe. God remains God and we are but small, mortal creatures. We must not take God’s grace as a declaration of equality with God.

We also learn from today’s stories that God calls us by name. God knows us as individuals and has a purpose for each one of us to fulfil – some great, some small. This is a huge claim when we consider the vastness of the universe – but it remains our experience throughout the ages: The God who formed the heavens and the earth has also numbered the hairs upon our head.

The story of the burning bush reassures us that God will be with us whenever we follow God’s will. God will not abandon us to cope on our own any more than Moses was left on his own to face the mighty pharaoh.

The story of Peter getting it so right in declaring Jesus the Messiah and then so drastically wrong in trying to stop him from going to Jerusalem shows us that even if we are inspired by God, we can still get it massively wrong. Humility and seeking the guidance of scripture and other Christians are essential to save us from howling mistakes committed “in the name of the Lord”. Being right in the past is no guarantee of future performance – so be careful!

Moses lives one of the most faithful and effective lives ever. He is the solid foundation of Jewish faith and on that foundation Christ could enter the world – yet Moses didn’t enter the Promised Land himself – he died looking at it from across the Jordan. Peter was the appointed leader of the people of the resurrection which would eventually sweep across the world – but he died a terrible death on Vatican hill.

Faithfulness to God does not guarantee an easy, untroubled life – it may mean the very opposite. Our faith has to be big enough to cope with apparent defeat, failure, disappointment and struggle – as well as the high points of crossing the Red Sea (Moses) or seeing the crippled man stand up and dance (Peter – Acts 3:8). Faith is about trusting God in the bad times as well as the good, believing all is ultimately safe in God’s hands, because in Christ, God has overcome the world.

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