

**14<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

## **Exodus 19**

The other week on the Gower retreat I did an exercise with the group where I placed some drawings before them of different characters and asked them to choose the character that most represented their image of God? There was a policeman, a Father Christmas, an old grumpy man in the clouds throwing bolts of lightning around, a picture of a Jesus type figure holding up a man who had collapsed and finally an abstract picture of a woman caught in a gust of wind with her umbrella inside out.

Quite a few people chose the picture of Jesus holding someone up. Someone chose the picture of the effects of wind blowing right through you and unsettling you, but the majority of people refused to choose any one image and stood in the middle. It's not surprising after all, we are a dissenting church, full of non-conformists. It's in our DNA not to be compliant. Comment was made that actually all those images of God could be supported through texts from the bible.

For some people god is a rather frightening person. Some are more comfortable with gentle Jesus holding on to you.

The description of God in Exodus 19 confirms their worst fears. For others God is a loving Father and they are put off by the description here. Exodus offers all types of Christians something to learn here.

Our sermon themes during May will follow the daily Bible readings in the IBRA notes, focussing on the chapters 16-40 in the book of Exodus. Exodus in the Old Testament tells the story of how the Israelites are liberated from slavery in Egypt, escaping the tyranny and oppression of Pharaoh, crossing the Red sea and wandering in the wilderness in search of the Promised Land. We pick up the story after the escape and when they start their wilderness experience. This sermon series is going to be about how we cope with the freedom of faith, how we relate to God and know God's presence and provision for our lives. How we become the people we are meant to be, how we live in the freedom of faith and respond to our Creator.

Last week I looked at how freedom can be a scary thing. The Israelites didn't have food in the Wilderness and grumbled and wished they were back in Egypt as slaves. They couldn't cope with freedom and wanted to be back singing the old songs again. But God provided for them and a new relationship of responding to God and relying on his provision ensued.

This week they start to encounter God and realise that is a scary thing!

When the Israelites arrive at Sinai, they first had a morally challenging experience – or perhaps one should call it a relationally challenging one. It marks a new stage in the covenant relationship between God and Israel. We often think of Sinai as the occasion when the covenant came into being, but God was already in covenant relationship with Israel; the exodus happened because God was mindful of the covenant. What happens at Sinai is a kind of renegotiation of the terms of this covenant, as will happen again when Jesus comes. God is not afraid of renegotiation. As the people grow and mature different conditions come into being. Relationships are not static, they change and develop and even in human relationships you have to renegotiate all the time.

I did training with a lot of people many years ago on marriage guidance and they talk about the pinch and crunch moments in relationships. Pinch moments are when new things happen in the lives of the couple, like a new job or a new hobby. They need renegotiation as to how that couple relates. The crunch moments are more life changing moments like unemployment, the arrival of children, disability or loss of some sort, conflict, and affairs. How do you renegotiate your relationship in the light of those

occurrences? If you don't renegotiate the relationship is going to be fragile and probably break. Communication is necessary: sharing honestly what our position are, how we can accommodate both our desires and wishes, or where compromises need to be made to continue to live together. The analogy is limited of course because one partner in this story is God and the description of God in this passage leaves the Israelites in no doubt that God is not to be messed with and needs their attention. But the point I'm making is that God renegotiates the relationship with his people

When God made a covenant with Israel's ancestors, it was 99% a commitment on God's part, a promise about something that God would do. There were no specific requirements laid on Abraham except that he be circumcised. The situation has now changed. God has initiated the process whereby the covenant promise is being fulfilled. The people are on their way to the country God promised them. God has rescued them from slavery in Egypt.

Admittedly if you were an Israelite, you might think the language about the eagle's wings was a bit rich. You can imagine the grumblers from last week repeating to themselves 'I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself' says the Lord in verse 4. Eagle's wings?

Excuse me we walked. That's why it took us two months to get here'. Those who prefer to praise rather than grumble will see this phrase in a more praise vein: that through that journey God carried them in so many ways. WE always have options on how interpret our experiences don't we?

Anyway God can reasonably think that the commitment between God and Israel should become more mutual. If the Israelites also now keep the covenant, as God has, they can have a special position in connection with God's purpose in the world. 'Priestly kingdom', literally a kingdom of priest and holy nation' is a twofold way of describing the same thing. The stress lies in the first two words in each phrase. There is a sense in which they are a nation like any other nation, and in due course they will be ruled by kings and be a kingdom like any other kingdom; but they are a holy nation and a priestly kingdom.

Their being a priesthood stands in some tension with their being a kingdom. Being a kingdom means one person has supreme power. Describing them as a kingdom of priests reminds them (and reminds the monarch) that they all have a close, priestly relationship with God.

God' description of them here is the origin of the expression 'the priesthood of all believers'. It's easy for pastors and people to think that pastors have a special relationship with God, but God implies that this is not so. Pastors have power, because of our ordination and position, but all the people have the special relationship.

Being holy stands in a different tension with being a nation. Nations have natural ways of functioning. Egypt has illustrated what nations are like. Being a holy nation involves being in the world but not of the world. Being holy means being different, other. You follow a different master. You follow different values. The obvious difference will be spelt out later in how God expects his people to behave, especially to contrast their lives of servitude and oppression and domination in Egypt, with living free, living with respect for one another and not exploiting each other. These are going to be commandments – but commandments that will set us free and give us a good life not enslavement and oppression like what they experienced in Egypt.

Could Israel survive in the world on this basis? Israel's experience in the Bible seemed to suggest that it could not and that it needed to be like other nations in order to survive (notably by having a king to lead it into battle – and the being a kingdom where there are hierarchy's and

some do better than others. The church has likewise found it cannot function in the world on that basis as its structures and procedures are the same as those other organizations sometimes. God's words put a demanding but also encouraging vision in front of it.

The people responded: 'we will do everything the Lord has said'. If only!

Although God has said the Israelis will be a kingdom of priest, it is only Moses who is summoned up the mountain to meet with God. He is the chosen one. After the coming of Jesus the Spirit rest on all believers and the words of Jesus that we did not choose him but he chose us applies to all believers. Through the blood of Christ we are all accepted into God's presence. We can all go up the metaphorical mountain and speak with the Lord. I spoke last week how this year is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Martin Luther stood on his convictions that the church need reforming. It had lost its way, it had corrupted the scriptures and brought in what he believed to be false doctrines and wrong practices. He wanted the church to return to scripture, to know that we are saved by grace through faith, and thirdly that we are a priesthood of all believers. We don't need a priest to intercede with God for us and pronounce forgiveness of our sins. WE can go direct to God because of Jesus, our Greta high priest. Just

read the later to the Hebrews for an exposition of that truth.

God promises to come to Moses in a dense cloud. That is an apt image for us at the moment. God speaking through a dense cloud. We have spent the last few months reflecting on this issue of same sex marriage and we vote on whether this church should host such ceremonies next Sunday. For many of you it may feel all a bit dense. It's not clear. We have had voices telling us the Bible says one thing and voices telling us the bible says another: all arguments with some credibility to them. You may think the bible is very clear on this matter – but I hope you have engaged with the counter arguments before you say such a thing. We have listened to personal stories and testimonies, we have tried to discern ow the spirit has been at work in our world and culture and how the spirit of Jesus is leading us today. What would Jesus do? But it may all seem like a dense cloud. The key is to be in the dense cloud. You are all priests. Live up to what you are called to be. Spend time in that dense cloud with God. Try and listen, try and hear God speak to you. Don't just turn up and put a cross on your ballot paper without engaging with this issue – that is not being a priest.

Being a priest is being aware of human failings and limitations, human hopes and dreams, human sin and

goodness, human need and injustice and talking, shouting at, crying to God as a result of it all. Then listening to God talk, cry and even shout back.

This week sees the start of Christian Aid Week when we remember the cries of the poor and stare at an unjust world. Whereas there are seven verses in the entire Bible that mentions homosexuality in whatever form, there are hundreds and hundreds of verses which speak of God's concern for justice, God's anger at the rich getting richer at the expense of the poor, the powerful oppressing the powerless and denying them justice; or the powerful removing those who oppose them or who run investigations about them. Hundreds of verses of God's wrath and anger against such people.

We need to have a sense of perspective about this. I'm not saying the issue we vote on next week is not a serious one. It is, and we need to be priestly about it. It affects people's lives; it can bring pain and hurt to people on both sides of the argument. That's why we need to hold each other in the love of God. If we have gone into the dense cloud to listen for God and come down and hear different things let's not fight over that: that's just the limitations of being human. How can we tell who is right? WE all see through the glass darkly at the moment. One day we will see face to face – but at the moment, even with scripture, the

revelation of Jesus and the promise of the Holy Spirit, we are still in a dense cloud. But if we have been priestly and gone into that dense cloud, if we have had the desire to be truly faithful to following the way of Jesus, then let's honour that in each other. But do you really think God is going to burn with anger towards us and condemn us if we make the wrong decision in his eyes over the question of whether love, that is faithful and committed love, is acceptable in some cases or not and whether it could be called marriage? Particularly when we have tried to make that decision in prayer priestly reflection? The message from scripture I get is that God gets angry when people wilfully don't follow his ways: his ways being what will be spelt out over these next few weeks as revealed at Sinai: don't be like the Egyptians where you lived in slavery, oppression, tyranny and fear. Respect me, respect each other.

The scary presence of God on this mountain to Moses is designed to get Israel to take God really seriously and not trivially. That is the key issue for all our lives: do we take our Creator seriously: especially over matters of justice and the equality of all people under God. The writer to the Hebrews in chapter 12 of that letter comments on this Sinai story and draws a contrast with the position of Christians. We might think that it is about to rejoice that

Christians do not have to think in terms of fear of God. The contrast it notes is that the Israelites were merely listening to God on earth.

‘See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?’ Hebs 12.25.

They and we need to be afraid of God because they and we have already seen how much God cares for them and us. God rescued his people from slavery for freedom. God rescued us through Jesus from sin and death, so that we may live life in all its fullness. Any departure from that risks the wrath of a holy God. So the writer of Hebrews sums up: <sup>28</sup> Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup> for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’ 12.28

We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2 v9

Bibliography: J Goldingay Exodus for Everyone SPCK