

15th October 2017

Exodus 33.12-23

Our Alpha Course started on Monday and it is an opportunity to refresh your understanding of the Christian faith, to go over the basics again of what Christians believe and how they practice their faith. Each evening there is a video to set up the open discussion afterwards. The videos have been remade and are excellent, featuring interviews and scenes from around the world – not just one talking head.

In this first video a couple of people share how they came to faith: how they encountered God. Nicky Gumbel talks about being raised as an atheist but going to University and being challenged, as a trainee lawyer, to investigate the evidence for Christianity. He will explore more of that – how we can be sure Jesus existed, the gospels are historical and the resurrection happened, in this week's episode.

There was an interview with Bear Grylls the celebrity adventurer – who describes his faith as the backbone of his life, helping him face the storms and whatever may hit

him, but also how God still loves him despite the mess he makes of his life.

There was also an interview with Francis Collins, one of the world's leading scientists, who heads up the World Genome Project mapping the millions of DNA in our bodies. He describes his conversion from atheism to believing in God. I want to show that clip now:

VIDEO CLIP <https://alpha.org/watch>

In the clip he says how it was encountering a woman who was suffering and seeing what a difference her faith made to her that made him ask questions. He was challenged: 'what do you believe' – and he went away and explored the evidence and the arguments: he thought his way into faith but then his thinking about God became knowing God. Head knowledge became heart knowledge.

This month we have been looking at the theme of God's provision and have been using the story of Moses to highlight this. Most people know about the escape from Egypt and the parting of the Red sea. Last week we looked at the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments as the

Israelites wandered in the wilderness. This week we see how Moses wanted to know God more: wanted to see God face to face, wanted to meet God. How God provided an encounter for him to help his faith.

While God was giving Moses the Ten Commandments the rest of the Israelites are making an idol of gold, a golden calf and having a wild party. They want something visible, before their eyes, to represent God. Moses finds out and throws the stone tablets at them and God threatens to abandon them.

Moses pleads with God, *the whole thing won't work if you don't come; the people want your Presence. I want your Presence.*

God gives in. *My presence will be with you*, God tells Moses. Having gained some ground Moses pushes farther. Moses pleads again—*Show me your glory*. It is as if he is saying to God—*Look, we've been through a lot and we are going to go through a lot more together and I don't really even know you that well. I don't even know what you look like. You are asking a lot of me, of the people, couldn't you just show me your face?*

Have you ever prayed that prayer? God show yourself to me? Show me your face, show me your grace?

Maybe it's a prayer of doubt. Maybe it is a seekers prayer, maybe it a prayer for encouragement in the face of tragedy and trial – I need help. I need something to keep me holding on.

In times of tragedy people can cling to faith in God as their only hope. In tragedy I've known people lose faith in God, and I've known people find faith in God. You can never predict how a person may react in the face of personal tragedy.

Theologians and philosophers argue about the different kinds of worlds which a perfect being could in theory have created. A perfect world where hurricanes that can wreck devastation on millions of lives never happen. All we know is life on this planet. The way our world works. The evidence suggests that God does not simply make the world but makes the world make itself. In all this interplay of different forces stuff like hurricanes happen. We long for God to intervene to stop some terrible accident in a miraculous way but where would it stop?

There is an amusing film that tackles this old chestnut of God in relationship to the world. Bruce Almighty stars Jim Carrey as someone who was down on his luck and started to blame God. So God decided to take a vacation, so fed up was he with everyone complaining. Whilst away He put Carrey in charge. The first thing Jim Carrey's

character does is to try and woo his girlfriend, who has he recently upset. He sets the scene for a romantic moonlit dinner for two by moving the moon closer to his balcony and throwing a few more stars in the sky. The two of them had a great night!! However when he woke up the next morning the news was all about the devastation caused in other parts of the world due to the sudden lunar and cosmic movements. His head was full of people's often contradictory prayer requests. It was a difficult job being the Almighty. He had no idea about its severe limitations.

It doesn't stop people of faith asking questions? Bold people like Moses asking God to show Himself.

When Mother Teresa was visiting one of the most horrendous slums in the world in Calcutta, she was asked how do you explain all this in light of your claim that God is a loving God. Why does God let things like this happen?

Mother Teresa answered 'when I see him, he's got a lot of explaining to do!'

Maybe that is why she lived so long. Every time she approached death you could imagine God saying 'hold on! Don't let her die yet! I don't think I can handle her right now!'

The Bible has many parts where the writers question God, show doubt, unbelief, anger. It's an honest book at times.

Next month we will have the annual remembrance Sunday we will recall the atrocities of war, where rules go out of the window and it is often kill or be killed. Whenever anyone escaped from Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp in Poland, the SS guards would arbitrarily choose six people to hang as a way of discouraging further escapees. Any prisoner who contemplated escape would know that six innocent people would die.

After one escape a twelve year old boy was among those chosen for the torturous death. When the trapdoor of the scaffold swung open and the boy fell, his body weight was too light to snap his neck and kill him. Instead, the boy hung from the rope squirming and shaking for almost half an hour until he slowly choked to death.

As he hung there, shaking in the cold of the evening, one man asked another, 'where is God?' where is God while all of this is happening?'

The man he asked pointed to the boy at the end of the rope and said, 'He is there. God is right there.'

It is an ambivalent statement – you could read it as if God is dead and no use. You could read it as God is in the pain

and tragedy seeking to redeem it and transform it somehow.

The Christian story has tragedy and glory, death and resurrection, suffering and joy. Jesus on a cross for Christians is God who is no stranger to the tragedy of life – yet gives no easy answers to the tragedies of life. I do believe in the power of prayer and have seen some remarkable things. But I also know many prayers don't get answered in the way we want. There is a great mystery about life and a great mystery about God which is evident in this story of Moses asking to see God's face.

God's well-known reply is—*No human can see my face and live*. God will put Moses in the crag in the rock, cover his face with God's hand, pass before him in all God's glory, and then remove God's hand in time for Moses to see God's back—the backside of God's glory.

What exactly is the message God is sending to Moses? God is not ready for that kind of face-to-face intimacy? Is it an insult because God still is a little hurt about the rejection and not quite ready to make up completely? Or is there some truth to the, *no one can see my face and live*, thing?

What Moses sees might be something like the wake of God's glory, the end effect of God's full frontal passing-

by. It's as if Moses (and all of humanity) has no ability to comprehend the fullness of God, but only the resulting impact of God's presence in the world, in history, in the lives of God's people.

Now and again I believe we get glimpses, sightings of God's glory in the midst of our day to day world: Flashes of God's backside.

I have just had a retreat on Lindisfarne holy Island and it allowed me to stop and enjoy God's creation. Martin Luther said creation is God's second book of revelation. We glimpse God's glory in the handiwork all around us: beautiful sunset, gorgeous birds singing away, seals waving at you, big open skies that open you up to the transcendent God. But also other more intimate personal revelations:

I remember an old lady I knew who suddenly lost her son. She was devastated and confided with me that she cried herself to sleep most nights. 'Why God, why?' was her lament. She fought to keep hold of her faith, even of her life – was it worth living? One night as she lay in bed she described how through her tears she had a picture in her mind of Jesus approaching her. He said no words of condemnation, no words of justification, or explanation. No words of judgement. He just came with tears in his

eyes. As he opened his arms to embrace and comfort her she noticed the nail marks on his hands.

She recalled how in the stories of Christ's appearances to his disciples after the resurrection, his wounds remain. They may have healed and been transfigured but they still remain. That picture, a very biblical picture, of the wounded Christ embracing her in her pain helped her find the courage to carry on. It was a glimpse of God's suffering yet resurrection glory through Jesus.

My own father died nearly twenty years ago. It was awful seeing him struggle for breath, seeing him die before my eyes. The night before he died I was praying to God for help and strength in this trial. The words 'he's safe in my hands' came to me. The next day I was at his bedside as he breathed his last breath. His last words to me were 'I'm safe in God's hands'. His use of the same phrase that I had received in prayer the night before was a real gift and comfort to me in that time of loss. Speaking personally for myself, I had faith that this wasn't the end. For me, my faith encouraged me to believe that the final word was not going to be tragedy and death. I had hope for a glory yet to come.

One day of course we will all know whether God is real. Doubt will be taken away. Christians believe we will see face to face. Even now when we accept Jesus into our lives

and invite him to be present alongside us through his Spirit, as Paul wrote in the second letter to the Corinthians, we can have a sense of the glory of the Lord being with us through his Spirit. That is what many of you here already know. You can have the reassurance within your heart that God is with you, not to condemn or judge, but to bless, to forgive, to love. It is a spiritual thing that you can ask God, even today, to fill you with his presence. 'Show me your face', 'show me your glory...'

Cheddar Gorge is just down the road in Somerset. One day in 1763 a young church minister was caught in a tumultuous thunderstorm in the cliffs nearby. The minister, Augustus Toplady, took refuge in a cave and found himself reflecting on the way the 'rock of faith' provides us with a shelter from the storms of life. He died in fact of TB when he was thirty eight. The words of the hymn 'Rock of Ages, cleft for me' formed themselves in his mind there. Its opening line is a riff on this story from Exodus. The story and the hymn have in common the insight that there are aspects of God's own being that will be a threat to us but that God in person saves us from these and seeks to bless us.