

The burning bush

Moses was just like any one of us! He engaged with God, he struggled with God, he was sent, he resisted, he went, he did well, he did not so well, he got angry, felt disappointed, hopeful, he learned and grew Yes, he is one of the great biblical figures in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition, but I think he is that because, like any one of us, he deepened his humanity and grappled with God right there in the heart of who and what he was, right there in the midst of all that was happening in his particular world. And because of his 'yes', just like that of Mary and other biblical figures, the Divine Presence broke into human affairs. There is debate about whether Moses did actually exist and lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt into the Promised Land, the land of Canaan, or whether this story refers to a number of other ways the Jewish people came into identity in Canaan and eventually established a kingdom there. However, historical or not, and if we put aside the 'Cecil B De Mille Moses' leading thousands of Hebrews in grand epic style across the Red Sea, and we consider the man himself, I think we may be surprised to see something of ourselves there. And Moses may become a spiritual guide for us.

Moses was a complex character. He was a Hebrew, born at a time when the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt and the Pharaoh, fearful of any threat to his power, had issued a decree that all the newborn Hebrew male children were to be killed. In an effort to save her baby son, Moses' mother, Jochebed, hid him for a few months, but later placed him in a basket and let him float down the river Nile. Recognising him as a Hebrew baby, the Pharaoh's daughter, bathing downstream with her maidservants, rescued him and took him to the royal palace. And as it turned out, Moses' own sister, Miryam, who had been there at the river too watching the outcome, was able to suggest a Hebrew nurse to help with the child - and the nurse she ran and fetched was Jochebed, Moses' mother! The Pharaoh's daughter named him Moses, a name which means, 'drawn from the water'.

So Moses, the Hebrew, was raised and lived as an Egyptian prince. But deep within him there remained his Hebrew identity. One day, infuriated upon seeing an Egyptian treating a Hebrew slave badly, Moses murdered the Egyptian. In fear of his life, he fled to Midian where he was taken in by a Midianite priest, Jethro (in some sources he is also called Reuel or Hobab), in thankfulness for the help Moses had given to his seven daughters who had been treated badly by some shepherds as they went to fetch water at the well. Moses married one of the daughters, Zipporah. And so we come to the part of the story that I invite us to ponder today. It all began while Moses was out in the desert looking after the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro:

"There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush: he looked and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up'. When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am'. Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God'" (Exodus 3: 1-6).

The burning bush which was not devoured by the flames but continued to burn strongly caught Moses' attention. And so, curious, he moved closer. Might this be the story of our own lives? Into the ordinariness of our everyday lives comes a moment of insight, an awakening, something hitherto unconsidered, a casual word, an invitation, an experience which stops us in our tracks. And then there was the call to him: Moses! Moses! And the command to take off his shoes, to recognise that he was standing on holy ground. If we, like Moses, do pause and look more closely, if we do take the time to ponder this insight, listen, look into this experience, take these words to heart, we might find ourselves face to face with something greater than ourselves. Engaging with meaning and purpose, identity and direction. Grappling with God.

“Then the Lord said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey ... So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt’. But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ He said, ‘I will be with you’” (Exodus 3:7ff).

But Moses wasn't convinced and there follows, over almost the next two chapters, a wonderful to and fro between Moses and God. Moses threw everything he could at God: Whom shall I say sent me? What if they don't believe me? Or listen to me? And then he looked at himself and there too he found cause for excuse: I have never been eloquent, I am slow of tongue and speech. O my Lord, please send someone else!

Our horizons may be lifted. But then, like Moses, our fear or our reluctance may kick in. I am comfortable as I am! What might be asked of me? This is too big for me. Who am I to do this? And so we justify our reluctance and we wrap our fears and insecurities around us and come up with all sorts of reasons to disregard this moment and its depth and possibility and continue just as we are. When Moses protested that he wasn't eloquent, God promised God's own words. When Moses said he was not up to the task, God promised to be with him. When Moses begged God to send someone else, he offered him support in the shape of Aaron his brother. In other words, God simply promised to be with Moses. He did not try to convince him that he was in fact eloquent or that he was up to the task. No, God simply said, 'I will be with you'.

Moses was not let off the hook and neither are we. So what might we make of this story of Moses and the burning bush? In the Book of Psalms (Psalm 42) there is a magnificent line: 'Deep calls unto deep'. We live in the context of Great Mystery, of Holiness. And this Mystery is continuously self-disclosing. All around us and indeed within us are signs of Mystery: we have only to open our eyes in the morning as we awaken to a new dawn or gaze at the stars or hold a newborn child in our arms. In our Christian Tradition this self-disclosing of Mystery, of God, is understood as Word. In the Book of Genesis, for example, God 'speaks' and creation comes into being: "God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light". All around us, each day, God speaks. But we have to notice it. We have to hear it.

We have to give it more than a passing moment. Let it crack the shell around us and settle into our soul.

One of the things Pope Francis said to those at World Youth Day in Krakow, is this: "Say no to worrying only about the sedative of yourself and your own comfort". His words make me think of Moses and of ourselves too. We often get in the way of ourselves! In terms of spiritual growth this is the greatest danger. Christian spirituality is all about letting go, abandoning oneself to the Divine initiative and allowing ourselves to be shaped and moulded just like the lump of clay in the potter's hands. This is also spoken of in terms of dying and rising. As Jesus said, "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it". We are called into a radical self-abandonment, a freedom from ourselves and our own comfort to be free to be the dwelling place of Mystery. And free enough to give it our attention.

There is a marvellous poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, which opens up this horizon to us:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

Essentially Moses and the burning bush tell this story. The burning bush is what is known as a 'theophany', a manifestation of the Divine Presence, we might say God offering God's hand. But this moment was not for Moses alone. He was given a task. Not just any old task. Moses was asked to be part of that Divine self-disclosing which brings life out of death, order out of chaos. I have seen the suffering of my people in Egypt and I've come to do something about it - and I am sending *you*. This too is something at the heart of our Christian spiritual tradition. In fact, all our spiritual practices have as their intention an increase in the life of God in us and a sending forth to do good, to love, to bring the Good News into the world, to transform. We turn inward to find our depths, to be created anew, to take that hand, only to turn outward. This is the way for all of us. Even enclosed forms of

religious life such as contemplative, monastic orders do not live for themselves alone but in order to hold the world in prayer.

Moses' story reminds us that we must look around us and see where the bush is burning today and, finding ourselves in the presence of Holiness, cast aside our objections and rationalizations, and join this great undertaking. Muslims gathering in churches for Mass with Christians in response to the killing of Fr Hamel in France; Chancellor Angela Merkel refusing to abandon her policy of welcoming refugees; outrage at the treatment of youth in the Northern Territory; disgust at Donald Trump's rhetoric. Holiness continues to break into the world and we are called to this too, to jump right in, no matter how small or how insignificant we think we are. 'Deep calls unto deep'. Like Moses, we too ought to remove our shoes for that ground is indeed holy.

In an article in the online *CathNews* at the time of the Krakow World Youth Day gathering there was a marvellous testimony of this: "In the context of such carnage, such an apparent contagion of madness, where can hope be found? In all honesty, the last week of July made the case for hope in eloquent fashion with the World Youth Day gathering in Krakow. Why? For one thing, the spirit in Krakow was relentlessly upbeat ... hundreds of thousands of Catholic youth from all across the planet came together in the streets of a major European city this week and left no destruction behind, but rather indelible images of friendship and fraternity ... these young people exuded a different vision for the future of humanity, one based on a global solidarity, respecting differences of class, race and culture without viewing them as divisive, and embracing religion not as the problem but as the wellspring of the solution".

To effectively listen and respond to God's word, our Christian spiritual tradition is insistent that silence of the heart is necessary. It is necessary so we can hear God speak everywhere. Lest we get in the way. And this is certainly the great image that remains for me in this story. To return for a moment to our Genesis creation story, we might consider it this way: In the beginning there was absolute silence. Through God's Word, God spoke into this silence, to create the heavens and the earth. Then God rested. God's Word, however, has continued its creative activity throughout human history. And this is where we come in. Word and silence complement each other. Silence, in the most positive sense, is the environment and atmosphere, the sacred space, into which God speaks God's Word, both to create the world and save it from corruption and death. As God declares through the prophet Isaiah: "My word that goes forth from my mouth will not return to me empty; it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). And as we see, God had to silence Moses in order to get him to truly speak!

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