

Exodus 3: 1-15: Moses in a larger context. Keith Rowe May 14 2023.

The dramatic story of how Moses led his is among the stories that have done most to shape human history and for Jews and Christians it has soaked deep into the mentality that makes us who we are. The story is set in the time of Egyptian Pharaoh Rameses I about 1200 years before the time of Jesus. Though reared in luxury Moses identified with the sufferings of his own Israelite people and according to our story was invited by the mysterious presence of God to lead his people on a journey out of slavery and towards a society shaped by all the qualities that were absent in Egypt: peace, justice for all, care for the marginalised and sensitivity to the call of the compassionate God who we are told feels the pain and the struggles of ordinary people. Moses became a servant of what must have felt like an impossible dream.

When later generations asked about the source of Moses' steadfast and courageous leadership they were told the story of how as a young and troubled man he had encountered God in the wilderness and from that day knew he was enlisted in the service of an energy that glowed like a burning bush and was nearer to him than his own breathing, a presence would never grow weary or be deaf to the weeping of the poor. The burning bush experience was life changing - as though for an instant a curtain was drawn back and Moses saw into the truth of life, what it might become and the role he could play in the furtherance of God's purposes for humanity. Moses and his loyalty to this experience became one of the generators of goodness and possibility in human history. The story became a template to help people of later generations grow sensitive to the summons of the same mysterious presence, the God who refuses to be named, catalogued, fully understood, yet whose presence is all embracing.

Today I want to enter the story of Moses and the burning bush in a way that recognises the enlarged horizon within which Christian faith can and needs to be understood in our time. The burning bush is among a group of life shaping stories that continue to suggest who we are and who we might become. It belongs alongside similar stories that tell of world shapers who encountered truth, God, reality, the deepest possibilities for human living and who through their stories continue to generate life, truth and courage into our day. There's the story of Gautama Buddha, born sometime in the fifth century before Jesus who was awakened to a deepening understanding of human possibility. There's the story of Jesus of Nazareth, a son of the Moses tradition, who while being baptised sensed a call to servanthood and to the service of God's inexhaustible and inclusive love. And there's the story of Muhammad who in an Arabian cave about the year 610 CE sensed that God had laid a hand on him and empowered him to convey a message about life and possibility to an unjust and divided society. The story of Moses at the burning bush belongs within the context of this group of similar but different tales of human encounter with deepest truth. In a time when the religions of the world are learning to appreciate one another and to work together it's an appropriate context within which to explore today's reading.

The story of Buddha's encounter with deepest truth is as compelling as the story of Moses. A young man, Siddhartha Gautama, leaves the privileges of life in a wealthy Nepalese family circle and goes in search of truth. He sought escape from what was then understood to be an endless experience of suffering that captured humanity and locked people into an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. His journey was long, lonely and painful. Eventually, sitting beneath a large tree, he sensed with crystal clear clarity that the cause of human suffering was desire and selfishness. He saw clearly the foolishness in seeking for satisfaction in things that are, in fact, impermanent and passing. He saw equally clearly the human pathway towards deeper truth and what life could become if we escaped from the seductive attraction of human greed. There was no sense of God from beyond reaching into his life, rather an awareness of deep truth welling up from the depths and a sense that he must share what he knew with others.

Muhammad was a young trader and traveller troubled by disunity among the tribes of Arabia and deeply aware of how the poor of his time were oppressed and marginalised. He yearned for change in a society ripe for revolution but without a key that would open the doorway to newness. In the year 610 CE he was praying in a lonely cave in a desert area when he was overcome by a sense that God was speaking to him and wanted him to share a message that could renew an ailing society and also sensitize people to God's presence in every area of life. He shared the words that welled up within him when he prayed, with friends who shared his dreams of a new society and of new ways of serving Allah, the Arabian word for God. Later his words, born in the silence of the cave, became the words of the Quran.

The story of Jesus is well known to us. At about age 30 he went to the River Jordan to identify with the renewal movement led by John the Baptist. As he emerged from the water following a baptism of cleansing he sensed a claim on his life. He felt that he was invited by the mysterious presence he described as Abba, father, to become an extension of Abba-love in a divided and unjust society and to begin a renewal movement that would be more radical and more filled with the promise of newness than even the movement led by John the Baptist. Like Buddha before him and Muhammad after him, and Moses before them all, he gathered a group of followers who would learn and embody the way of living and believing he would pioneer.

Each of these figures, Moses, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad were changed by an encounter with transforming truth. Three of them described it as an encounter with God- the mystery that lies beyond yet within all of life, the energy that empowers and heals, that holds life together and seeks to draw us toward peace and justice and an enriched life together. Buddha did not speak of encounter with God, understood as a person like presence, but more of an awareness of truth experienced in silence and in relationships. Each of these four figures and the teaching they provoked ignited a fire in human hearts that continues to burn and to shape human living. Sadly each has also been misinterpreted, caricatured and wilfully misunderstood. Their teaching about the possibility of living in love, compassion, justice and peace has often been obscured. Each of them founded a community dedicated to a life lived for others and

in the service of the common good. Together they represent a stream of wisdom and possibility our world needs. There are clear similarities between these formative stories but there are also clear differences for each arose from a different cultural and social context. Do they all bear witness to the same divine presence? Surely they must. The mysterious presence, we call 'God' comes to humanity in many guises.

There's time to briefly refer to just a few insights emerging from our universal perspective as we recall these stories in a somewhat damaged twenty first century.

1. In none of these stories is God fully described. The name that is given in response to Moses' question regarding the name of God is at best enigmatic. Jews still refuse to utter the name "Yahweh" lest they fall into an idolatry of the name. Muslims to this day recite ninety-nine names of God to ensure that the all-pervading mystery of God is retained. There is a 100th name for God – the sound of silence. Christians live with multiple images and metaphors for God, none of which is sufficient to grasp the mystery of God present in every part of creation. The clearest Christian description of God is that "God is love," akin to the love embodied in Jesus. Buddhists for the most part refuse to speculate about the existence or nature of what others call God lest they get lost in futile debate about the nature of this God and are diverted from learning how to live beyond greed and with compassion for all of life. God, the mystery beyond words, met at burning bush, in Jordan River, in an Arabian cave or beneath an Indian tree remains a mysterious yet undeniably present reality - a presence more real than intellectual certainty.

2. Each of our four pioneers of human possibility in response to divine presence is sensitive to human pain. The violence, division and injustice damaging their society troubles each of them and prompts their awareness of God-presence. It's a turning point in human sensitivity to God when in the Moses story God is pictured as saying "I have seen the affliction of my people, heard their cry and know their sufferings." Is a troubled spirit, sensitivity to the pain of others, a sign we live within the circle of God's expansive love for every person, every community? Is our awareness of the pain of others also an experience of God who feels and endures the same pain? Our four universal witnesses certainly suggest this. Sensitivity to our neighbour's pain seems to be linked to sensitivity to God-presence.

3. For each of our four pioneers there is an indissoluble link between sensitivity to God's presence and the search for a just and peaceful society. Each of our witnesses believe life to be a journey towards what could be. Each is gripped by an urgency for change, in themselves and in their society. For each of these great religious pioneers awareness of God-presence and a care for society belonged together. They encouraged their followers to live from this twin focus: love for God and for world. They are in truth two sides of a single coin.

4. These four ancient stories are reminders to those with imagination and who are willing to dream of what might be that we humans are part of something bigger than the everyday and the trivial human arguments that so easily derail us. We belong

within a larger truth, within the grace of God the mysterious presence, who in the silence where deepest truth is found still touches human lives and is experienced as a call to deeper and more love infused living – the same whispered voice that spoke to Moses from a burning bush, to Muhammad in a cave, to Jesus in a flowing river and to Buddha under a tree. Or in a church building on the corner of Tennyson and Dalton Streets in the city of Napier.

In the name of God who in our day and into the future is drawing all humanity together into a unity not yet fully imagined. Amen.