

Lent series *Signposts in the desert - finding Jesus in Exodus*

21st February 2021 - God's Heart for his People

Exodus 3:1-17

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.'

⁴ When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!'

And Moses said, 'Here I am.'

⁵ 'Do not come any closer,' God said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶ Then he said, 'I am the God of your father,^[a] the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey – the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.'

¹¹ But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'

¹² And God said, 'I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.'

¹³ Moses said to God, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" Then what shall I tell them?'

¹⁴ God said to Moses, 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I am has sent me to you."'

¹⁵ God also said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites, "The Lord,^[d] the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you."

'This is my name for ever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.

¹⁶ 'Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, "The Lord, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt. ¹⁷ And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites – a land flowing with milk and honey."

Matthew 28 ¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

Just as the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus is the defining story for Christians, the Exodus was the defining story for God's people in the Old Testament. Not only this, but the way God works in Exodus - rescuing his helpless people from slavery, through the decisive defeat of a seeming omnipotent oppressive power, giving them a new identity and leading them towards the promised land - is both a preview and a pattern of his great final act of salvation through Jesus.

So, this Lent as we prepare to reflect once again on the death and resurrection of Jesus over Holy Week and Easter, looking at the highlights of the story of the Exodus will hopefully give us new insights into the meaning of all that Jesus has done for us.

Of course, between the rescue and the promised land is the journey through the desert. This is particularly relevant for us at this present time.

I don't suppose any of us are finding this continuing lockdown easy and whilst we look forward to Boris's statement tomorrow and the hope of the restrictions being relaxed over the coming months, we are all longing to be finally rid of this oppressive scourge of Covid-19 once and for all. Well however bad it may feel for us, it is nothing compared to the situation of the Israelites in Egypt. We are told in *Exodus chapter 1: 11 [the Egyptians] put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. ... 14 They made their lives bitter with harsh labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labour, the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.*

They whipped them, and because Pharaoh feared the way the Israelite population was growing the sought to slaughter any male child as soon as it was born – a foreshadowing of the slaughter of the innocents by Herod the Great when Jesus was born.

The first timeless truth this story tells us about is God's wonderful compassion: *7 The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.*

Whatever pain you and I might be going through, God sees us, he hears our cries and He is deeply concerned about our suffering. That is true with regard to you and me and it is true with regard to every single man woman and child whom the Lord has created. Remember how Jesus looked out across the crowds and his heart was filled with compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Not only does God feel our pain but His plan is to rescue us: *8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

This is precisely why He has appeared in physical form to Moses - in the burning bush – and is speaking to Moses and revealing who He is: *I am who I am.* Moses would never forget this experience, but we can look back to an even more wonderful experience, when God came down among us in physical form and spoke to us and revealed so clearly his true nature – when he became a human being and lived among us.

But when God comes to rescue, he does so through human agents. And so, he tells Moses: *10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.* In the same way Jesus came to release us from the slavery of sin and lead us into the promised land of God's kingdom. But the Lord also says to each of us *Go! I am sending you.* Jesus sent out his disciples to proclaim the good news of God's compassion and his rescue plan for the human race, for our friends and neighbours.

Like Moses, we might well say: *Who am I that I should go...?* And the Lord's response to us is the same: *'I will be with you.* As we heard in our gospel reading, when the risen Lord Jesus met up with his disciples who no doubt were wondering how on earth they were going to be able to *go and make disciples of all nations*

He re-assured them *surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'*

That same promise remains true for us today.