

Moses - the cost of faith.

In your youth did you used to dream about how your life would turn out? Never in a million years did I ever think I would be married to a man about to be ordained! What about Moses? I don't expect that when he was a lad in Pharoah's palace he imagined he would spend 40 years leading the Israelites through the wilderness. Scripture tells us the Jewish race had dreamt of a saviour, the messiah to come and rescue them, but only them because they were the chosen people. For us Jesus is the saviour. We've frequently thought about the links between Jesus and Moses over the past weeks of this sermon series.

I have to admit I have grown in fondness for Moses. I admire his tenacity, his courage and the huge responsibility he took on despite his weaknesses and failings. Serving God became his number one priority. Over the weeks Moses' different emotions and personality traits have come to the fore in the talks we have heard. Moses has become a real person to me. I find this really helpful and hopefully you do too. As we see the real life struggles of the biblical characters this enables us to make more direct comparisons with what we experience in our own lives.

Today we find Moses on top of the mountain with God. Over the months since Moses lead the people out of Egypt God had been giving Moses the law. Moses then returned and shared with the people what God had said. On this occasion Moses had been gone many weeks. With their leader missing the people went to Aaron and asked him to make a god they could follow because they had no idea what had happened to Moses.

The people stirred each other up. Things were not going the way they dreamed of. They felt bereft of Moses; and God was not behaving in the way they wanted him to. How easily they forgot the favour God had shown them. The parting of the Red Sea, the cloud by day, the fire by night, the manna and the quail. They wanted a god who is visible. Did Moses represent God to them and when they could no longer see Moses did they feel abandoned by God? So what did they do? Rejected God and Moses in one fell swoop and decided to replace them with a god they could control. A more manageable god. So the story of the golden calf begins.

Aaron's part in this is curious. He has been with Moses all the way through. He has been present when God had spoken. The Ten Commandments were given by God way back in chapter 20 and they are very clear that God says "you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol". Aaron knew all this. So quickly all is forgotten! Is it Aaron's fear of the crowd and their complaints? Fear of what would happen if they turned against him. Is this what makes him collect their jewellery and make a golden calf with it? His fear and wish to appease them seems more pressing than his desire to please and obey the Lord.

I wonder have we ever found ourselves in that situation? The crowd draws you into something you later regretted.

Moses' time on the mountain abruptly comes to an end. The all seeing, all knowing Lord tells Moses what is going on at base camp. God is angry. Moses pleads mercy for the people and rushes off. Arrives only to find a wild party going on. Now Moses is furious, he drops the stone tablets he has brought down from the mountain. Gets hold of the golden calf and destroys it; then calls Aaron to account. Oh dear! And what does Aaron say? Does he man up and take responsibility. No. He says "They made me do it". What does this remind us of? Times when we have made excuses! A human trait which goes back to the first excuse in Genesis? "Why did you eat the apple"? God asks. "The serpent made us do it" Adam and Eve replied.

You can read the rest of the story. But what I'm left thinking about is how Moses felt. Here he is doing the best he can. Being obedient to God trying to lead rebellious people. Yet the hurt, the pain of rejection. The people and his own brother let him down. How disappointed I imagine Moses felt. I might have been tempted to say "I quit" and flounce off in a huff. But no, despite whatever personal emotions he had to deal with Moses just carried on leading the people. Serving God was his first priority. Despite the pain of rejection Moses would carry on loving the people.

Let's turn our attention to our gospel reading. Jesus public ministry has started and he returns to his hometown of Nazareth. He speaks in the synagogue. To start with everyone is amazed at his wisdom and authority. Then it's as if a switch is flicked, they turn on him. "Isn't this Joseph the carpenter's son?" They don't like the message that Jesus is sharing. Not only does he tell them He is the Messiah; He also tells them that God's love, grace and healing is available to all people not just the Jews. They just can't hack this. The Jews are special, the chosen race. God's love and grace should be just for them. Their anger rises. They reject Jesus, hustle him out intending to throw him off the cliff.

On our recent pilgrimage to the Holyland we visited Nazareth Village. It's a place designed to give you a feel of what life was like in 30AD (photo). About 300 people would have lived and worked in Nazareth in Jesus' time and all of them came to the synagogue every Sabbath. (Photo) This is a full sized reconstruction. The tour guide spoke to us on this passage. It was very powerful. The pain of Jesus being rejected by his own friends and neighbours. Yet knowing that serving God the Father was what He would continue to do. Despite the pain of rejection he would carry on loving the people.

I can't help but feel sad. Here we have examples from the Old and New Testament where God's people have turned against Him. Yet I have to ask myself how often have I done exactly the same thing. Not liking how things were going. Thinking God wasn't being very nice to me. Thinking I knew better. (The dangers of feeling superior!)

This map (slide) shows where the Israelites travelled during their 40 years wandering in the wilderness. There was a much more direct route. How often do we do the same thing? Wander back and forth, through life, rather than taking the direct route. How lovingly and patiently our Father God waits for us to wake up to the truth that His way for us is best.

What a blessing it is to know that however much we wander off course we can get back on track. Ultimately there is only one way(picture of a one way road sign). Moses knew this. Jesus is the one who shows us the way.

