



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Sermon

Trinity 12

Exodus 3.1-15

Sunday 3 September 2017

by Nicholas Henshall

Exodus 3.1-15 (Old Testament reading from Track 1 of the Common Worship provision for the Principal Service)

A few years ago my friend Nigel went on a mini break to the Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheik. While he was there he took the tourist day trip to St Katharine's Monastery on Sinai, and he brought me back a memento - a post card of the Burning Bush. Now, the monks at Sinai believe that the original bush still stands in what today are the precincts of the monastery. And on the card, there it was: the Burning Bush looking splendid. But Nigel gave the card to me because he was fascinated by a detail in the bottom left hand corner: there, right beside the Burning Bush, in vivid red, stood a fire extinguisher!

Clearly the monks were worried that the Bush might burst into flames at any moment!

In today's reading from Exodus there is indeed something extraordinary going on. A pivotal moment in the whole history of salvation. Moses, tending his father in law's sheep, beyond the wilderness on Mount Horeb, encounters - or rather is encountered by - a bush that keeps on burning, that is not consumed. Not so much a burning bush as the unburnt bush. The text itself plays with words, punning the Hebrew word for a bramble bush with the similar word Sinai, the mountain of fire.

It's a story deeply familiar to Jews and Christians down the centuries, and even features in the odd Hollywood epic - usually in ways that demonstrate that you shouldn't try to film the miraculous! At its heart is God's missionary call to Moses. Moses has after all run a long way from this already - and we know that he will, like us, again and again try to resist God's call.

But here in the most dramatic way possible, out of a burning bush, God makes his purpose plain. He doesn't cajole or advise. He simply comes out with it: get your shoes off - something big is going on here, and this is what I want you to do: "come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." (Verse 10). There's a detail in this line that we ought to hear very clearly - but because of the way we listen to the Bible in church we often miss it. It's that little word "send". It's clear enough in English but remember - for 200 years before Jesus, Jews had been reading the Bible in Greek, and the Greek bible was the bible of the early Christians, and the word used here in Exodus is the "apostle" word, the "I am sending you out" so deeply familiar in the words of Jesus to the - er, oh yes - APOSTLES when he sends them out to preach and heal. And indeed the word "apostolic" - "sent out" - that we use in the Creed.

A little but important point about language: the early Christians hearing this passage and the repeated use of the word "apostle" "send out" could have absolutely no doubt that this is more than just an important early story about Moses. They would know - as we should know - that this is a story addressed directly to them, directly addressed to us here in our communities and cultures today.

Let's return to that in a minute after we've had a look at the content of Moses' mission. God states it very simply in verse 12: to bring the people out of Egypt. That's the job. So Moses is to be God's apostle, the one sent out by God, God's agent if you like - to lead God's chosen people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land; to lead them from death to life. Again the ears of our hearts should be twitching - these are themes we know all about. These Easter themes of liberation and new life ARE the good news we know in Jesus Christ who leads us from death to life, from slavery to freedom - which is why of course the account of the Exodus is often read on Easter Eve. This isn't someone else's story. This is Jesus' story. This is our story.

Immediately Moses puts up resistance and explains why he can't do it. We can really identify with that - "please Lord, send someone else" is after all a common response to the call of God. The Book of Jonah is a fantastic fable on exactly that theme. Moses is rather more clever - if he's going to do this, he says, he wants proper credentials. He wants proper authority: "tell me your name so they'll believe!" God's response is extraordinary - yet so familiar that it's really easy to miss. God says "I am - that's my name!"

That Exodus 3 should tell us this is extraordinary enough - God's name is "I am" or "the one who is". In fact you can find that title on the icon of Jesus in the St Cedd's Chapel in the Cathedral. And of course that's why again the ears of our hearts should be twitching - because "I am" is exactly what Jesus calls himself in all the Gospels, and especially in John. Jesus knows when he uses this phrase that people will know exactly what he means - that he is God. It's a real shame that again and again translations put "I am he" where they should put "I am", but don't miss it. Whenever Jesus says "I am" it is a very explicit statement of his divinity - not that he is acting like God but that he is God.

So for us today, the heart of this is the church's apostolic mission. How are we as individuals and communities going to be those who lead people from death to life, from slavery to freedom; how are we to be those who heal the sick, raise up the fallen, bring peace to a broken world.

We do it because that's the task God has given his church and God in Christ has come among us to show us exactly how to do it, and at what cost this comes.

Exodus 3 is not a nice story about a bizarre event on a mountain sometime in the 13th century BC. It's an account of God's sending us out, empowering us in the strength of Christ to be apostles now.

The big question maybe - as much for us as for the monks on Mount Sinai - is whether the bush just burnt the once. Or whether the bush was always burning - it was simply that this time Moses turned aside and noticed! So keep your eyes peeled, and don't reach for the fire extinguisher!

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