
Sunday 18th October – The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Exodus 33:12-23 & Matthew 22:15-22

Exodus 33:12-23

Moses and the glory of the Lord

Moses said to the Lord, 'You have been telling me, "Lead these people," but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, "I know you by name and you have found favour with me." If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember that this nation is your people.'

The Lord replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'

Then Moses said to him, 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?'

And the Lord said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.'

Then Moses said, 'Now show me your glory.'

And the Lord said, 'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.'

Then the Lord said, 'There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.'

Matthew 22:15-22

Paying the poll-tax to Caesar

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. 'Teacher,' they said, 'we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the

truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the poll-tax to Caesar or not?'

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, 'You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.' They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, 'Whose image is this? And whose inscription?'

'Caesar's,' they replied.

Then he said to them, 'So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'

When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Reflection

How comfortable are you with the idea of having to challenge someone? May I say, right at the outset, that this is not an area in which I feel either comfortable or confident. But earlier this year, just before lockdown, my Mum had a very poor discharge from her local hospital; firstly it was all arranged without consulting anyone from the family, then they failed to supply all her medications and discharged her with an IV line in place. Then when I wrote a letter of complaint, they forwarded it to a third party breaching data protection. So I had to challenge the hospital about all this, to ensure that future discharges from that ward were better planned.

In our OT reading today we have an account of Moses issuing a challenge to God to secure a promise from him that he will lead the people into the Promised Land as he has pledged. The background to this passage is that God is angry with his people who, despite having promised to obey God's commands, choose to worship an idol in the form of a golden calf because they have grown impatient waiting for Moses to come down from Mount Sinai. The result is that God, in his anger, tells them to leave Sinai and continue their journey to Canaan, but says in 33:3 *But I will not go with you.* What can this passage teach us? Is it ever okay to challenge God?

If ever I'm having to challenge anyone, my concern is to get my facts straight, to be truthful, and perhaps most importantly to remain calm. But Moses, in our first reading, is having a rant! Listen to his words from The Message Bible: *"Look, you tell me, 'Lead this people,' but you don't let me know whom you're going to send with me. You tell me, 'I know you well and you are special to me.' If I am so special to you, let me in on your plans. That way, I will continue being special to you. Don't forget, this is your people, your responsibility."*

So Moses isn't calm, and he doesn't get his facts straight either. He says that God has not let him know who He will send with them, but earlier in verse 2 God has said *I will send an angel before you.*

Have you ever been in a situation where you're so incensed that you're not listening to what the other person is saying, but focusing instead on what you want to say next? This is what seems to be happening here. God replies: *"My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."* But its as if Moses doesn't pause for breath, and continues with his complaint. Again from The Message: *"If your presence doesn't take the lead here, call this trip off right now. How else will it be known that you're with me in this, with me and your people? Are you traveling with us or not? How else will we know that we're special, I and your people, among all other people on this planet?"*

Finally, God concedes fully, *"I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."*

It's no small thing to persuade the Creator of the universe to change his mind, so Moses pushes his luck just a bit further. *"Now show me your glory."* God will not, however, for Moses' own sake, grant that request fully. Moses can see only God's back, not God's face, for his face cannot be seen.

We're thinking about prayer in our 10.30 services at the moment, and Moses here models prayer for us; prayer that is not afraid to hold God to God's promises, prayer that is not afraid to appeal to God's love for his people, even over and against God's holiness. Moses, through this audacious prayer, succeeds in securing God's promise that his presence will stay with them. Moses shows us that we can be completely honest with God about our feelings when we face challenges, that He is open to having his mind changed, that he hears and responds to our prayers, but also that he has limits. God is holy, we should never forget that, but God is also God with us. We have his presence with us as we face challenges in our daily lives, and for us, as for the Israelites, it is enough. His presence is always enough.

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