

Sunday 18 August 2024, Trinity 12 Matins

Exodus 2.23 – 3.10

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

I wonder if some of you are familiar with this phrase: 'The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.' St Augustine said it about the bible and it has been a fundamental principle of Christian theology from the earliest years of the Church. 'The new is in the old concealed', or we can see the events of the new testament foreshadowed in the old. 'The old is in the new revealed', or we can understand the old testament because the new tells us what it really meant. I want to apply this method of interpretation to today's first lesson from Exodus, in order to remind us that our faith is found everywhere in the scriptures and that our Lord Jesus is spoken about everywhere in the words of the Torah and the Prophets.

The people of Israel are in slavery in Egypt and cry out for help. God hears them and comes down, taking the form of a fire, nourished but not consuming the bush it inhabits. From this fire he speaks to Moses and promises to set his people free and bring them into a new homeland. This is the basic outline of the story. Now let me offer you a parallel story, with St Augustine's words in mind. God's people the Church are in slavery to sin all over the world. God hears them and comes down, taking the form of a man nourished in the womb of the Virgin Mary, taking on humanity by her but not consuming her in his divinity. Born of her, he speaks to the apostles and tells them he will set his people free and bring them to a new homeland in heaven.

I don't think I need to labour the point for you to see how easily the two narratives fit into one another. They both recognise a fundamental need for freedom from slavery. They both have as their central actor God who comes down to provide a solution to humanity's problem. They both recognise his interaction with the world to be one that gives life rather than destroying it. And they both offer a saving message about a better homeland. But what is key to recognise is that one solution is temporary, while the other is permanent. Bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan was a distinctly 'earthly' act; it was a geographical move accomplishing freedom. Bringing humanity out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of God's beloved son-- a phrase St Paul uses in Colossians 1—is an existential move. We take taken from one type of existence to another, and this new state is qualitatively different.

This should alert us to something that is foundational to Christian faith: its conception of reality is grounded in more than the physical. To free someone from slavery and give them a new home is one thing; to free someone from all evil and give them a new state of existence in eternal bliss is quite another. The former can always be undone, whereas the latter cannot, because of the nature of the change. What God did through Moses worked for a few centuries. What God does through Jesus lasts forever. Have you ever considered this: that every act of God in the Old Testament points to a greater fulfilment in the New? And that every great hero of the Old Testament points to the Saviour Jesus? Are you used to hearing and reading the bible in this way?

Moses and Aaron who lead the people out of Egypt, Joshua who headed the conquest of Canaan, Samson who defeated the Philistines, David who cut off Goliath's head and reigned for forty years, Solomon who established the kingdom with wisdom. These and so many more are types pointing beyond themselves to the greater leader and priest, the greater judge, the greater king. They point to Jesus in whose work we see the culmination and capitulation of everything they could never achieve: true freedom, lasting peace, perfect sacrifice, and an eternal kingdom. 'The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.' Or, as one of my favourite hymns puts it, 'types and shadows have their ending, for the newer rite is here'. Because, yes, among those things that pointed beyond itself to perfect fulfilment in Christ was the Jewish sacrificial system with its blood-spattered altar and stinking burnt-flesh offerings. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of this when he says, 'For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate', that is, at Golgotha beyond the city wall of Jerusalem.

What a wonderful God we serve who has so marvellously arranged the course of history to tell us the story of the redemption that was to come. Nearly fifteen-hundred years before the birth of Jesus there was a man called Moses who gazed on a blazing bush that was not consumed. And from that fire came the voice 'I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob... I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land.' We hear that voice anew, and more surely, in the voice of Jesus who says, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.' And 'I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.'

The Exodus Moses accomplished in Egypt was a moment in time. The Exodus Jesus accomplished at Jerusalem (as St Luke puts it in his gospel) is a movement into eternity. And it should define our reality; not a reality bound by time and place and the stuff of this earth, but a reality beyond time, without the bounds of place, and consisting of the stuff of heaven. Our faith is in the greater Exodus and the greater-than Moses, a greater than all, to whom they all pointed, even though they died. The deathless One we worship surpasses them all in glory and splendour, and so does the kingdom over which he rules surpass in glory all the kingdoms of this world. Take, I pray, this comfort and this triumph to heart, apply to your mind the maxim of St Augustine and see that it was always God's plan to magnify Christ that all we who look on him with the eyes of faith might find our earthly dreams transformed into heavenly fulfilment. 'By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.' Amen.