



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 18th June 2023

Readings: *Exodus 19.2-8a; Romans 5.1-8; Matthew 9.35-10.8*

Trinity II

Trekking through some pastureland near Corfe Castle recently, I reached a crossroads. I could have gone in one of two ways, but the decision was made easy by a large and uneasy-looking gang of bull calves who seemed reluctant to share their space with me. The speed with which they approached me when I was scaling the stile into 'their' field made me reverse post-haste.

Not all of life's crossroads make one's decisions seem as straightforward as that ill-tempered livestock did. Often, we are aware of various possibilities and struggle to discern which is going to be best. Three examples have been part of my conversations this week. What do we do when the crossroads at which we are standing is **graduation** from university and the need to plot our life's course thereafter? Maybe we have delayed the decision by doing a Masters, and then a PhD, for which we sought extensions, but eventually, the crossroads is unavoidable. How do we cope with the crossroads of **bereavement**, be it caused by death or divorce, when we cannot reverse back into our old normality because nothing will ever be quite the same again, but there is a plethora of options for our new tomorrow? And what about the crossroads at which we stand when we're **awakened to the reality of God** – maybe for the first time playing with the pricelessly delicious thought that 'the love of God has been poured into our hearts' ... 'the love of God has been poured into our hearts' - but realise there are literally innumerable ways to take that God into our mindset and lifestyle?

Crossroads loom for us all. Maybe you are at one now. And they are nothing new. From the Hebrew Scriptures we read of the people of God being at a crossroads. They are recently released from their protracted slavery in Egypt, and even as the Exodus is a great relief and a new freedom, it is also a time of novelty, uncertainty, and vulnerability: 'where do we go from here?' Exodus 19 is not merely the 'next chapter' in a long saga, it is one of those pivotal passages of the Hebrew Scriptures. Placed at the heart of the Pentateuch – those first five books of our Bible – Exodus 19 is often thought of as recasting the whole narrative with some definitive new insights.

We tend to favour stories which we can slot into a particular time and place. That is not so with Exodus 19 as it tells of the people of Israel having a significant encounter with God. It's what we call a *theophany*, a visible manifestation to humankind of God. As a result, their sense of God is sharper than ever: who God is, what God is like, what God offers, what God asks.

As it happens, it has never been possible to ascertain exactly when ... if ... this theophany actually occurred, less still where. Of course, there is Jabel Musa – Moses' Mountain – towering above St Catherine's Monastery to which some of you will have been on visits to the Holy Lands, on a peninsula between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Maybe you even climbed Jabal Musa as dawn approached to see sunrise from its summit. Sure, it is a suitably atmospheric place for a theophany, but it is far from the only possible location. Whilst that improbability may be disappointing, maybe it is helpful. To locate this experience of God in one place is far more restricting than letting it be a representative narrative, revealing a truth about God who is not confined but cosmic, not time-bound but eternal. The God of Israel is not hemmed in and available only to a few, but universal, and revealed to all. Moreover, liberating this theophany from happening on just one day in all time lets us discover God not once upon a time long ago, but as an on-going experience now.

One of the big ideas that gets redefined by the Exodus 19 theophany is how God relates to the people. The big idea is covenant, and that too is very far from being new. In the book Genesis, we read of how God made a covenant with Abraham personally: 'I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.' (12.2) Exodus 19 – this finely wrought tale of a specific mountain top encounter, yet revealing something for everyone everywhere always – takes the covenant to a wholly different level. Here are four hallmarks of this newly re-minted covenant. First, the people are reminded of God's history of saving work – God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt. We hear God say, with poetic genius, 'I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself.' Secondly, this later covenant is not just with one person, Abraham, but with the whole nation; it will give them identity as a people devoted to the Lord. And no-one is beyond its scope. Thirdly, it is reciprocal: just as God expresses Godself to be with them and for them - 'you will be my treasured possession' - so they answer with their readiness to keep the covenant. And fourthly, the people's response is not so much in dramatic gestures like circumcision, sacrifice and name-changing but in a clear statement of faithfulness: 'Everything the Lord has spoken we will do.'

Now, all that matters as the people are seeking wisdom and inspiration for how to face their crossroads. They gain confidence that they are God's treasured possession, and that God is both with them and for them, come what may; they gain hope knowing that God bears them on those eagle's wings; and they gain a purpose for the future, walking with God so they can serve God's purposes as people devoted to the God who is devoted to them. Standing at this crossroads, the children of Israel find that the prospect of a Promised Land begins to take shape in their minds. Its milk and honey are not just sweet treats for a moment but the bread of life forever. It's the source of a peace they've not found any other way, and of a purpose that lays hold of them as never before: to obey God's law, and keep their side of the covenant.

If that is true for the Israelites at their crossroads, might it be a paradigm that works for us, too? - not least, as we graduate and look into the world of life and work and opportunity; as we face up to the new normality of not having beside us someone who used irreplaceably to give our lives their contours and completeness; and as we entertain the possibility of life in fellowship with God, whether we are babes in Christ benefiting from spiritual milk, or those who need stronger meat to stimulate and satisfy our faith and following.

Whether we select a career that uses hands, head, or heart, doing so is an adventure marked with challenges and changes, and more so now that having one job for forty years is a thing of the past. Most workers will have to reinvent themselves, maybe several times throughout their working lives. And, however well-intentioned and necessary they might be, many are finding that the heightened levels of accountability, safeguarding and legislation of which to have cognisance, and of social media that leaves us so exposed, only ratchet up the stress levels. Moreover, there's the crossroads we reach later, as our career comes to an end. Or, as in our evening years we feel compelled to slow down because either the body or the brain are less efficient than they were. That's yet another range of feelings to manage as the crossroads options reduce.

The crossroads with which bereavement faces us is frequently unanticipated, unwelcome, and without the frisson of excitement that often defines career choices. Bereavement's unpredictability can be torturing, too. As the months go by, we may find ourselves feeling a restored equilibrium, only to find grief's cruel zig zag suddenly plunges us back into a shadowland of loneliness and desolation, of anger or regret. As if from nothing, a scent can stir it, a scene, a photograph, a piece of music. And it can happen after years have gone by. I cannot hear *Come unto him, all ye that labour*, from Handel's *Messiah* without being

catapulted back into my late mother's presence, her exquisite soprano limpidly hanging in the air, stirring memories at once both saddening and delighting.

And what of that crossroads in life which leaves us wondering which spiritual path to tread? Should we stick with the one everyone around us seems to be on, and which for a long time we have trodden habitually, perhaps rather casually, or is there another path, the one not taken, the one less travelled by, might that make all the difference. (cf Walt Whitman)

At such crossroads as these – career, bereavement, spirituality, or whatever your crossroads might be - we can be like the children of Israel, wondering what our Promised Land is to be, and fearing the bull calves that stand in our way. At such intersections, to know that the God-who-is-as-God-is-in-Jesus-Christ is both with us and for us, come what may, in an inviolate covenant, can be of incalculable reassurance. It doesn't remove all doubt, but the doubt is fine, it doesn't answer every question, but I don't want to be caught up in a god so small that I'm left with nothing I don't know. Nor does it ease every sorrow, but what is life if it has no showers amidst the sunshine? No, far more tellingly, through that covenant we have access to God's wisdom for guidance and good judgement, to God's mercy for second chances, and to God's love to bear us on eagle's wings. And that can transform the perilous into the possible, the opaque into the transparent, the lonely into the companionable, which is what a covenant is all about.

May it be so, for your blessing, and for the glory of God, Amen.

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