

Readings

Exodus 24:12-18

Maurice Andrew says that the role of Chapter 24 in Exodus is the linking of various elements of the Sinai revelation into a composite whole. Moses goes up to God on the mountain and receiving the Ten Commandments is described as theophany (appearance of God) on the mountain.

Mountain experiences can be awesome experiences of the otherness of God. In this episode Moses is a human mediator of otherness to the people.

For New Zealanders Andrew suggests that the recognition of this otherness means that no one individual, group or people can claim to represent God or the whole truth.¹

Matthew 17:1-9

This is Matthew's version of Mark 9: 2-9 and, as we begin our journey to Easter, it is read as an affirmation of Jesus' divinity.

In this morning's Gospel reading there are obvious echoes of the Exodus episode we have just read where Moses, along with Joshua, spend six days up the mountain before God calls Moses out of a cloud on the seventh. The whiteness of garments in the gospel reading often features in apocalyptic writing which attempts to describe heavenly scenes. Furthermore, when angels are mentioned in Old Testament, they are often clad in dazzling white.

The presence of Elijah and Moses are symbolic, and the traditional explanation is that Moses represents the law and Elijah the prophets. But Elijah is also regarded as the forerunner of the Messiah. The dwellings, tents or booths, feature in the festival of Tabernacles and represent the tents used in the wilderness and the cloud symbolizes the Shekinah, or presence of God.²

Bill loader notes that 'Like the baptismal story this is a symbolic narrative which celebrates that, in Jesus, heaven and earth intersect. He adds that we might find other ways of saying this. In him God and humanity come together or turning the imagery upside down we could say in Jesus the depth of life surfaces in the divine reality.'³

Sermon

Both of these readings are about spiritual awakening, the sudden realisation that there is a greater presence in our world than ourselves. A spiritual awakening brings awareness that things matter because we are not only connected to other people but also to the entire creation. Such moments can also be theophanies where people feel they are in the presence of the mystery that brought everything into being.

Of course, in this scientific world such moments can also be explained by people's physiological state and a variation of chemicals in the brain. But the process our body uses to connect with the divine is irrelevant and a spiritual awakening can also confirm our own identity within creation.

That may seem self-evident but one of the parents of modern philosophy, René Descartes spent a lot of time thinking about his own reality. Descartes finally coined the famous phrase 'I think therefore I am' and philosophers have either agreed or disagreed with him ever since. In so doing philosophers brought a new word into existence 'ontology', the study of being or existence. That word was also seized upon by theologians to argue the reality or otherwise of God.

The classic computer age science fiction film *The Matrix* highlights the ontological debate by asking us if we are sure that we are real, and not just living in someone else's dream.

¹ Maurice Andrew *The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: DEFT 1999) p.121.

² Warren Carter *Mathew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading*, (London/New York: T&T Clark International 2004) pp.347-348.

³ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtTransfiguration.htm>

One of my high school teachers used to ridicule individual students' mistakes by laughing out loud and claiming he was going to make them a character in his novel. As a shy teenager who tried to stay out of trouble I was never one of those students but when I look at the way my life story weaves in and out of other people's story I wonder if I am simply a character in someone's novel. The most worrying thing about that is that as I serendipitously make contact with people from the past, I think the author might be bringing the novel to a conclusion.

Of course, as I get older, I also seem to remember with great intensity events of my past but become frustrated when I forget people's names. A greater frustration is reaching the end of a novel where an author brings in significant characters from the beginning of the book and I can't remember why they are significant.

One of my intense memories is a time tramping in the Tararua Ranges on a beautiful sunny day. When we stopped for lunch the conversation wandered to religion and the consensus among my companions was that religion was irrelevant. At that stage I was still the shy youth I mentioned earlier so I did not join the discussion.

I was however a recent convert to Christianity so as we continued our tramp, I chastised myself and as the mist rose up from the valleys below its enfolding dampness seemed to reflect my disappointment in myself.

But my interest was awakened when the sun found a way through the mist and my shadow surrounded by a circular rainbow was projected on the wall of whiteness opposite. Suddenly the clouds cleared to reveal an orange sunset behind a distant Kapiti Island on one side and the Wairarapa farmland faded into a deep indigo sky on the other side. A warm glow enfolded me and my newfound Christian faith was infused into my very being.

Someone called out to me and the moment vanished into the tussock as my aching limbs took me down to the hut for the night.

That is a story from my life that is not unlike our Gospel reading but the meaning I take from it is stimulated by that reading.

Both our readings this morning help us in confirming our identity and binding our life journey to the divine story. Together these texts ground our story in the Christian story.

In Moses' encounter at the burning bush he asks for the name of God. The divine answer is 'I Am', which confirms that God is sure of the divine existence and the Exodus saga moves on to grapple with human questions of identity.

Today's Exodus reading is an amplified burning bush episode for the emerging nation.

Now the appearance of the glory of Yahweh was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. (Exodus 24:17)

Instead of a bush burning that was not consumed the whole mountain with Moses on it is on fire but not consumed. God is apparent to the people and they are not only connected to that entity, but they are defined by a set of laws.

However the mountain appeared to these people the story describes it as a spiritual experience and our Gospel reading builds on that tradition by affirming Jesus as the link between divinity and humanity.

In describing the gospel event the writers include Moses and Elijah in the vision to show that this is not a new story but a development of the existing tradition. Moses had the vision of the burning bush and he was within the fiery mountain when the people were given an identity as the people of God with a written moral code. By having Moses in the vision of the three disciples that link is maintained. There is also a link with their prophetic tradition by the inclusion of Elijah. But Elijah may also serve another purpose. The expectations of a messiah at the time of Jesus included Elijah returning to announce the messiah's arrival. Following Mark's lead John the Baptist is described in Matthew by allusions or references to a description of Elijah.

At Jesus' baptism by John the divine voice declares 'This my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' (Matthew 3: 17) In today's reading the divine voice says 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.' (Matthew 17:5). That is a repetition of the divine affirmation of Jesus' connection to God with the added command that the disciples should listen to Jesus.

The law is affirmed by Moses' presence, we are reminded of Elijah's return in the presence of John the Baptist and the divine voice connects with John's baptism of Jesus.

The divine voice also affirms Jesus' interpretation of the law for contemporary use—we are told to listen to him.

Jesus interpreted his traditional law for his own time and we must listen to Jesus through the scripture in the same way. In reading the text we must make an assessment of the meaning at the time it was written, the cultural circumstances of the time and reflect on the culture in which it is being read. Also important is any change of meaning in translation from the language it was written in to the language it is being read along with any change in the meaning of words over time. Most important is to capture the essences of the text, what is the issue the text is addressing rather than just reading the words. That was the basis of much of Jesus' teaching and in this passage he affirms divine authority for that teaching.

The three disciples, on behalf of all disciples, are told to listen to Jesus. Therefore, we must listen to him.

But listening to Jesus is not just a matter of taking his interpretation of Hebrew Scripture because we live in a different time and place. So, we must understand the power of story to transmit ideas and be open to the symbolism within the story that helps to convey that meaning.

The power of story, metaphor allusion and symbolism within our readings encourages us to find our identity as the new people of God through a spiritual experience of the risen Christ.

People of Jesus' time expected the messiah to arrive in a spectacular firework display and sort out the world but the spiritual experience of Peter, James and John only included them.

Just as our Exodus reading amplifies the burning bush story the gospel episode picks other symbols of divine presence, the shining white clothing which will also feature at the resurrection.

Most importantly this Gospel episode comes after the episode on the road to Caesarea Philippi where Jesus questions the disciples about his identity and Peter replies, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' (Matthew 16:16)

That was an understanding that the disciples gained from being with Jesus, it may even have been an assumption that led them to become disciples. Today's episode on a mountain away from everyone else was confirmation of that assumption in the same way my Tararua experience affirmed my learned assumptions for me.

The three disciples knew what they had learned about Jesus but, in what was most likely a time of reflection and prayer, they discovered for certain who Jesus was, and who they were.

They were not people in someone else's dream or characters in a novel. They were people who were part of the creative spirit, the mystery beyond all our knowing, and their calling was to bring us all to that understanding.

Some of us have such experiences and all of us can reach out in prayer and meditation. But to find meaning and identity in such experiences we need to learn our own faith tradition, learn to recognise the signposts within our scripture and find meaning in life's experiences along our spiritual journey.

It is within such a discipleship journey of learning and discovery that we find ourselves offering hospitality to a stranger and unexpectedly meeting the Risen Christ.

We may also take a quiet walk in the morning mist and quite suddenly know the Christ we meet along the way, and in that moment, we will also know who we are.

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