

'Moses and the Tent of the Presence'

Our Pilgrim Lent groups began this week with the question 'How and when have you experienced – or glimpsed – the presence of God?' Julia, who was leading our group, rather sagely and wryly glossed the question by saying, 'Because we're Anglicans perhaps we ought to say *How and when might we have felt that we have experienced or glimpsed the presence of God?*'

We all answered the question by talking about mountain tops and sunsets and flowers and birds - and other people. None of us said *Church, worship (apart from a reference to music, let alone the sermon*. I confess that reflecting on that afterwards I was a little disappointed, not I should add that I was disappointed in any of the members of the group; more disappointed that our experience of church was not such that this immediately sprang into people's minds.

But let's start from where we are and I'm encouraged to see that that's where the bible starts. Before the giving of the tabernacle, the tent of meeting in the wilderness, their mobile temple, in Exodus 25 and the following chapters where all its furnishings and fittings are described – just before that, at the end of Exodus 24, Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel go up Mount Sinai. There, it says, they have a vision of God: 'they saw the God of Israel', it says, and under his feet was a translucent sapphire pavement. 'They beheld God, and they ate and drank'. And then it speaks of another occasion when Moses went up the mountain and the cloud descended on the mountain and Moses entered the cloud and spent 40 days and 40 nights there, the first ever Lent. And then the next verse he is charged with the construction of the tent of meeting, a sanctuary, a holy place, where Moses would continue to meet with God.

You know that old saying, 'If the mountain won't come to Mohammed then Mohammed must go to the mountain.' Well apparently it doesn't go back to Mohammed at all, but the 17th century English natural philosopher Francis Bacon, who wrote:

Mahomet made the people believe that he would call a hill to him, and from the top of it offer up his prayers The people assembled; Mahomet called the hill to come to him, again and again; and when the hill stood still, he was never a whit abashed, but said, If the hill will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet will go to the hill.

Well, for Moses it was different, for he didn't have to go to the mountain; in the tent of meeting the mountain came to him and travelled around with him. There he met God in the cloud, we heard in our first reading:

When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses.

We know from the instructions given for the tent that in between the entrance to the outer tent, the holy place, and the entrance to the holy of holies was the altar of incense. Think barbecue – a perpetually burning fire, glowing through the night but allowed to die down a little in the morning for the incense to be poured over and the cloud of incense to rise in a great pillar. Here perhaps at the time of the morning or evening offering was where Moses met with God at the pillar of fire:

When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tents.

That reminds me of Isaac Walton's life of George Herbert when he says that those who were able joined him in church twice a day for morning and evening prayer:

and some of the meaner sort of his parish did so love and reverence Mr. Herbert, that they would let their plough rest when Mr. Herbert's saint's-bell rung to prayers, that they might also offer their devotions to God with him; and would then return back to their plough.

And no doubt we could apply what was said of Moses to Herbert too:

Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

What a beautiful line that is. I would just caution though that this intimacy and pal-iness is not at the expense of reverence and awe. The people would rise and bow down – something our Muslim friends could teach us about prayer that we've rather lost, I fear. In the Bible face to face relationship with God is never separated from an attitude of mind and body that instils reverence. The characteristic postures for prayer are standing, kneeling or bowing. I bet Mr Herbert's ploughmen at least took their caps off and bowed their heads.

The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that in the outer sanctuary of the tabernacle were the lampstand and the table and bread of the Presence. We're back to our favourite word, *panim*. In fact we've already had it because it's the face word so that when Moses met the Lord he met him panim to panim. Exodus 25 describes the Table for the Bread of the Presence – which in order of the furnishings, incidentally, comes second only to the ark of the covenant. It concludes with a word about the golden flagons and bowls for the drink offerings, and then

... you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always.

Now it doesn't just say the bread of the panim, it says the bread of the *panim* / *pan-i*, the bread of *face to my face*. On the table each Sabbath a fresh supply of twelve loaves was offered and placed, one for each of the tribes of Israel. At the end of the week the priests would consume the bread and lay another twelve loaves on the table.

Before the days of the Deuteronomic reform and the centralisation of worship in Israel in the one temple in Jerusalem, there were temples to the God of Israel all over the place, like parish churches. When the future King David and his militia were on the run from King Saul and his army they came to a place called Nob (1 Samuel 21) where they asked the priest whether there was any bread because they were starving. The priest said that the village was fresh out of ordinary bread but there was some holy bread that they were welcome to have, providing the men had kept themselves holy. This, we are told, was the bread of the Presence.

On the mountain you will remember, Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu 'beheld God, and they ate and drank'. That mountain top experience was replicated in the tabernacle, the tent of meeting. There was spread a table on which was bread and wine, a holy meal – in which the holy ones were allowed to share, once a week.

All this background is why Catholic-minded Anglicans reserve the sacrament: the bread of the Eucharist is reserved in a special place in the sanctuary and replaced each week from the Sunday

celebration. From that communion is taken to the sick and housebound but it also stands as an abiding sacrament of the Presence of God in Christ amongst us.

Being reared in a low church tradition in the Church of England I never really got or approved of such practices until about nine years ago when I was on retreat and spent a good deal of the time praying in the chapel where I couldn't help notice there flickering in the corner, modestly as it were rather than ostentatiously, was a candle a bit similar to the one in the corner of our sanctuary here. The prayer I was engaging with was the Jesus Prayer ('Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner'), which you pray over and over again until you're no longer praying it but it is praying you, as it were. My spiritual director used to call it the prayer of the Presence, for what the prayer did for you was to take you into the Presence, or perhaps better to make you aware of the Presence. And it certainly did and does for me, but at the same time as I was learning to practice the Presence of God through that prayer I was also becoming aware of the Presence in other ways too: relearning what Jesus meant by saying that 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst', that when the Scriptures are read and expounded as on the Emmaus Road, there he is, and that when the bread is taken and broken there our eyes are opened to his Presence; and that when we are sent out to the poor and the marginalised, the hungry and the prisoner, there he is too. I knew all of those things before of course but I think my experience of them was diminished by a poor imagination and, I think, a poor theology.

A few years ago I read this in a book by Angela Tilby. She writes of:

...an American theologian who took his little son out at night to show him the moon on a particularly fine clear night. He hoped to evoke a capacity for wonder in the child such as he and felt at the same age. But the child's response was [It's just] a lump of rock in space'...

Well, my Lent group has a less disenchanted view of the universe. We find God on mountains, and have learnt to eat and drink his Presence there; but perhaps we've severed too much the connection with what's going on here where we are invited to eat holy bread and, like Moses, encounter the divine Presence face to face, as with a friend.