

The Israelites, have made their Exodus out of Egypt. They have done so because whilst in that country they have been treated very badly – despised as foreigners, mistrusted for their prosperity and, eventually, huge numbers of them treated as slave labourers. They've made their way across the Negev towards what they have been led to believe will be their 'promised land'. They've been helped to find their directions by clouds on the horizon during the day and fiery lights at night, a kind of divine-guidance sat nav. For 40-50 years they've kept moving like a nomadic tribe facing and overcoming problem after problem – bitter water that had to be treated before they could drink it; severe food shortage, eventually solved by scraping up a kind of crusty residue they called 'manna' in the morning and foraging for dead quails in the late evening; then a serious water shortage leading to them having to break into hard but porous limestone rock formations to get the moisture out (a trick used by more than one British army officer in the more arid parts of Palestine during the First World War). As if that were not enough, they have, on more than one occasion, had their path blocked by tribes of people already settled in the areas they were crossing. These were folk who were not terribly keen on having what they considered as 'their' land invaded by several thousand families of people who seemed hell-bent, or as they saw it 'heaven bent', on seeing everything belonging to other people as theirs 'by God-given right'. It's been a tough time in their history.

Through all that time, Moses has somehow stayed in a position of authority as their leader, despite a good deal of moaning in the ranks. Now he has been able to convince them that he is to have a face-to-face audience with God at the top of a mountain when he would be given the general but definitive rules and regulations for everyday life. As the story unfolds he also receives incredibly detailed instructions on how they are to conduct all their family and commercial business once they are settled and even more detailed instructions on how they must conduct their formal worship – believe me, our book of Common Worship is freedom itself by comparison!

So a 'cordon sanitaire' is put around the base of the mountain and strict instructions given that no one, apart from a very select few, is to cross that line, on pain of death. Even that very select few are to go no further than a clearly delineated area. Just Moses and God are to be left alone over a period of time which will involve several trips up and down the mountain on Moses' part.

In the meantime however, a significant number of the Israelites have already been feeling for some time that they have had more than enough of Moses and his increasing hold over them and his growing control of their lives. Frankly, they've also been growing more and more disillusioned with God, or at least with the concept of God Moses has continually been putting into their minds – a super-controller capricious enough to kill hundreds of them with a terrible variety of plagues and pestilences whenever they step out of line.

2.

What they need is the kind of god other tribes have. One they can see, one they can control by making sure it can't walk or talk, one they can keep under control by making offerings and sacrifices to it, food, animals, human beings even if it's thought necessary.

Now that Moses was up there having his private, prolonged audience with God, this was the time for a kind of Israeli-exit! Without delay too. A quick meeting with Moses' deputy, Aaron, and all was in hand. Yes, a golden calf would do very nicely thank you; something precious and important looking, something they could see and parade in front of them; something they could literally follow into whatever threatening situation they might meet next; something that would allow them to decide for themselves how they were to treat it as something special rather than be dictated to by a self-appointed 'religious expert'.

And that, you may be sorry to hear after such a lengthy introduction, is where our story today begins.

There then follows that delightful dialogue between God and Moses.

"You need to get back down the mountain Moses – your people are rebelling against me and I'm getting very angry". "Sorry, Lord, what do you mean my people – they're yours, not mine!". "Never mind that, your people, the ones you brought out of Egypt, they've replaced me with a golden calf – I'm not having that." "Just a minute, I wasn't the one who brought them out of Egypt – that was your doing, I was just the one you chose to be their leader." "Whatever. You need to get back down there and tell them I've had more than enough of them and their rebellious ways. I'm going to wipe them all out and start again with a new lot. Forget all the business of a covenant with Abraham's descendants, I'm going to start a new one with you and all your descendants." "Oh no, you can't do that you promised you wouldn't do that sort of thing any more. Remember? After that Flood you promised you wouldn't go round wiping people out any more. And anyway you're the God of Abraham and Isaac and Israel. You swore to them by your own self; you said 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants and they shall inherit it for ever. You promised.'" "Oh alright then, I suppose you're right. I am a God of love and mercy and I did promise. We'd better forget about destroying them all. But you'd still better get down there and sort them out!"

I love it. Yes, there may be a certain amount of artistic licence in my telling of it, but the gist of it is there.

But we're not here to enjoy ourselves are we, so what can we possibly derive from all this that might actually be helpful in our daily lives as disciples of the Lord?

3.

First of all, I have to admit that it was only when preparing for what I might say today that I realised, for the first time, what an important moment that was in the story for Moses. He was being given the opportunity to take precedence over the very founder of the Jewish faith, Abraham himself.

“I have seen this people” says God “how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” And it is Moses who turns down this God-given opportunity to make more of himself than his proper and acceptable level of service to humanity. The lesson for us? Try at all times to have a sober estimate of your gifts and talents, your status amongst the people you are here to serve, the acceptable limits of your ambition. Don't let your calling and position in life, however grand or however base, go to your head – not even if you have a sense that it is God who is calling you up higher as it were. That's just the time to consider very seriously, like Moses, whether you could be in danger of letting your own self-assessment take priority over God's way for you.

The second thing to draw from all this is that we do need to remind ourselves that we are disciples of the Lord as presented by the New Testament, not the Old. I treasure those stories of what we call the Old Testament, not only for the enjoyment of the telling, but because I detect in them the gradual development of an understanding of God as the one eventually revealed in the person of Christ.

This is a God who, far from breaking out in violent wrath and indignation against us cares for each of us individually, like a shepherd, as today's Gospel reading told us, who goes out of his way to search for a lost sheep. It's a God who, in his incarnation life, did not particularly favour the devotedly religious ones who rarely, if ever, stepped out of line. He was perfectly comfortable in the presence of those whose lives were far from the ideal, presented for example in those Commandments for life that Moses brought down from his mountain top experience; those whom the religious authorities regarded as 'sinners' whose company was to be avoided; people whose very occupations went against social and religious acceptability, prostitutes and tax collectors and the like. I suppose for us that would mean feeling comfortable in the company of arms manufacturers, or cigarette sellers, or social 'scroungers'. They are all as acceptable to God as we are, perhaps even more so.

And finally, the God whom we worship is also, my New Testament reading tells me, a God who, far from being remote and distant from all the tragedies of human life is right there with us, involved in it all with us, experiencing it all with us; not a God who inflicts all the world's pain and suffering on us, however much the human species may deserve it. The God of the New Testament is a suffering God, not a God 'without parts or passions' as the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion quaintly puts it. Remember how Studdert Kennedy, Woodbine Willy put it:-

4.

Are there no tears in the heart of the eternal?

Is there no pain to pierce the soul of God?

*Then must he be a fiend of hell infernal,
beating the earth to pieces with his rod.*

Father, if he, the Christ, were thy revealer,

truly the first begotten of the Lord,

*then must thou be a sufferer and a healer,
pierced to the heart by the sorrow of the sword.*

Then must it mean not only that thy sorrow

smote Thee that once upon the lonely tree;

but that today, tonight and on the morrow

still it will come, O gallant God, to Thee.

This is our God, the Servant King; he calls us now to follow him.

Amen.