

Sermon for the thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost. 3 September 2017. Sacred encounters

The priest was sitting on the step, in front of the altar. A group of children gathered around him. He was asking them about the main person in the story from the Bible they had just read. Little Johnny put his hand up and said “His name is Jesus!” “Of course,” said the priest, and was about to continue talking about Jesus, when little Johnny stuck his hand up again. “Yes, Johnny?” “Well, since today is Father’s day, I can tell you Jesus’ dad’s name!” “Do you mean Joseph, the husband of Mary?” the priest asked. “No, no, no,” said Johnny, “the BIG dad, since Jesus is the Son of God. HIS name is Harold!”

“Harold?” said the priest. “Why do you think God’s name is Harold?” “That is easy,” said little Johnny. “We say it all the time. Our Father in Heaven, Harold is his name.”

We know the name of Jesus, which we usually translate as ‘God saves’. We don’t actually know the name of God, though there are various suggestions in the Bible. ‘El’ appears often, but that is simply the Semitic word for ‘God’. The closest thing that we have for a name for God comes from the passage we read today, Exodus 3:1-15. Moses was drawn aside from the flocks he was tending by a strange sight. Out of the burning bush God spoke.

Moses asked for a name. To know a name was to have some form of control. It gives an edge to conversation and connection. Remember the struggle at the ford of Jabbok where Jacob wrestled with God (Genesis 32). Jacob asked for a name. It was a way of trying to get back the upper hand in the encounter.

When you meet someone getting names is important. It opens up the communication, it helps to make deeper connection. It is why name tags are so important! “Hey you!” is nowhere near as warm and connecting as being able to say “Hi Bob” etc ...

Moses asked for God’s name and God answers with what sounds like a cryptic statement. “I am who I am”. That can also be translated as “I will be who I will be”! Moses doesn’t get a name. Moses gets the reminder that the one who he is encountering is simply the one who IS. Beyond a name. Beyond definition or limitation. God just IS.

Calling God ‘the one who is’ is a bit clunky and it is not surprising that the words from God out of the bush were turned into a name. In Hebrew they became a name of 4 consonants – technically called the Divine Tetragrammaton. That just means a 4 letter word. Written ancient Hebrew didn’t include the vowels but from other sources we know that the consonants YHWH were most likely pronounced ‘Yahweh’. Jesus’ name in Aramaic was Yeshua. The ‘Ye’ and the ‘Ya’ are from the same word. So Jesus’ name actually means ‘The one who IS, saves’.

That name became SO holy, though, that it was not spoken aloud. In the Hebrew text the vowels for Adonai (which means ‘Lord’) were written on top of the 4 letters YHWH and that is how we ended up with the mistaken name of Jehovah. But enough about names and letters.

Here was Moses. Encountering God. He had stepped onto holy ground. He had stepped into a sacred place. Moses was up close and personal with God. How awesome would that have been!! Later, as the people settled into the promised land, a LONG way ahead in the story, there were walls and veils and layers of hierarchy which separated people from close encounters with God. In Jesus the veil was ripped away, the wall broken down and we meet God face to face. What Moses had in an extraordinary way is what we have, what we are invited into.

You don’t often see holy burning bushes these days. I have been to St Catherine’s monastery in the Sinai desert. In the grounds of the monastery there is a bush which, so the sign and the tour guides claim, is the descendent of that original burning bush. I kid you not though, right next to that bush there is a fire extinguisher! I am serious. There really is!

I said that what Moses encountered is available to us. Yesterday I did a risk management seminar and so I need to say that if a burning bush appears here in front of the altar the exits are at the side and the back and the emergency evacuation assembly point is outside over there.

What would you do if you saw a burning bush. Maybe not here in front of the altar. Maybe in an isolated place, where it wasn’t spreading to other flammable material. Try to put it out? What would be your first response?? There is a practical side which might kick in at a moment like that. Or would you approach with wonder, as Moses did?

We are here on holy ground. We are here in sacred space. We are here encountering God, encountering each other. Being encountered also. Holy ground, as Moses found, is not just where God is but where we meet God, where we recognise God. Sacred space is space of awareness.

Anthony de Mello, a 21st century wise and faithful Christian spiritual writer and guide (who would have been 86 tomorrow) wrote “The greatest human gift is to be aware”. De Mello suggested that most of us are actually asleep most of

the time. We do not see. We live and move as if through a fog. We don't have our eyes really open to see what and who is actually in front of us. In some ways we don't even see ourselves clearly either. When our eyes are opened we enter into sacred space.

Sacred space is not artificially constructed. We don't build church buildings and they immediately become sacred spaces. Sacred space is discovered. Entering sacred space, moving onto holy ground, happens when we have our eyes open. Our physical eyes and our inner eyes.

You may not have encountered a burning bush, at least not like the one described in Exodus 3, but where has sacred space opened up for you? I want to suggest at least 4 places where sacred space has opened up for me, and perhaps also for you: in a person, in a place of beauty and wonder, in a place alone, and in a place which is much loved common ground.

Is there anyone who you have met, in whose presence you knew that you were drawing closer to God? Several people have told me that in the presence of a particular person they saw God more clearly. For me there have been several but one stands out as someone who has touched my life. Brother Roger Schutz, founder of the ecumenical community of Taizé in France. From the very first time I met him I knew that here was someone who lived close to God, who lived open to God, who lived aware and listening. Talking with him you knew that you had his complete attention. It was a profound encounter which I can still not only see in my memories but I can feel.

Is there a person who has shown you the presence of God, perhaps not that intensely but does anyone come to mind whose life and being has drawn you closer into sacred space?

I have been blessed to be able to be in so many places of encounter with beauty and wonder. When I ask in some study groups where people have seen the presence of God someone always says in a sunset or sunrise or in a gloriously beautiful place. In February this year I was blessed to stand at a place in the mountains in Rwanda, at a spot several hundred feet higher above sea level than the top of Mount Kosciuszko, looking out over the Volcanoes National Park. I had just had an encounter with Mountain Gorillas, spending an hour watching a family group, and I stood there looking over an incredibly beautiful valley and thanked God for being alive, for blessings, for the privilege of being there, for the wonder of creation, for everything in my life.

Being in a place of beauty and wonder it became holy ground, sacred space, a space in which I was deeply aware of being blessed. Where have those places been for you?

Wilderness places can also be sacred spaces. Places where we are alone, yet not alone. The vast Australian outback is a landscape of opportunity for holy ground. The one which comes to my mind though is not on solid ground at all. It is an experience that I wrote about in the brief blurb about me which I sent up here when my appointment was announced. I was in a canoe floating in the middle of Milford Sound in New Zealand. All alone I was not alone, and the only thing to do was sing. Have you ever found yourself alone, yet not alone, and your heart was so full of God's presence that you just knew that you were on holy ground?

The last piece of sacred space was a place where there has been common sacred ground for a very long time. Have you been into a church where you have immediately felt and thought 'this is a place of prayer'? For me one place like that which comes to mind strongly is Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. It was established as a church in the 6th century and grew to be the eastern equivalent of St Peter's in Rome. In the 15th century, when Constantinople became Istanbul, it was turned into a mosque. In the 20th century it became a museum. No one is officially allowed to hold services or pray there. But I am sure people do. The sense of being in a house of prayer is tangible.

May that be said of where we pray, that people who come here will say, "this is a place where people pray. God is here."

We are here, on holy ground, in sacred space. May our eyes be open, as Moses' eyes were opened. God is here.

Amen.

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