

Sundays between 28 August and 3 September, Ordinary 22 Year A

Returning to the mysteries of Ordinary Time brings back the pattern of Continuous and Related OT Readings.

OT Continuous

Exod 3:1-15

In the story of the burning bush we have a reminder that we must never confine God to what we think of as holy places. Though such places are important for us, God's pattern is very often to take us by surprise. Just as it was Moses' curiosity that caused him to turn aside, we too need to retain a childlike sense of curiosity to inquire, to make sense of what our senses reveal to us.

The result conversation between God and Moses is typical of "call" encounters in the bible. Moses is astonished, shocked, perhaps even horrified that God should regard him as worthy of such honour and responsibility. Perhaps his mind is running on ahead to the situation he might encounter later as he presents himself once again at the court of Pharaoh – but not now as honoured prince, rather as man-on-the-run.

Moses is desperate for some authentication, some authority he can point to when he presents his diplomatic credentials to Pharaoh. He asks for God's name. But what is a name for, exactly? Surely it is to distinguish Andrew from Arthur, Mandy from Mirabelle, a cow from a kangaroo. For God to name Godself would therefore be to place God in a crowd of individuals of the same kind – and that would be to deny God's utterly unique otherness. God's answer to Moses' cheeky question is to give himself no name at all: *I am who I am*. Which makes the point rather effectively!

Psalms 105: 1-6, 23-26, 45c

Yet here goes the psalmist calling upon the name of God. Poor chap, he has a real problem. Given this utterly unique otherness, how do we talk about God at all? How do we say anything meaningful about the sense of the sacred that has pervaded our lives and the stories of our people? In the face of so awesome a challenge, it might be prudent to say, with the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein *whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent*. The psalmist's answer is to go right to the very limits of what language can do, blithely ignoring the protocols and talking of God as though God is simply a person, active on the stage of human affairs. Pose the questions philosophically and it's all absurd; but the psalmist has something to say, burning inside him, and academic niceties must be set on one side; he talks of God as a person because he must; there is no other way of doing it.

OT Related

Jer 15:15-21

This is an extraordinary passage, in which the prophet reaches the point of despair, and accuses God of “drying up”, having once promised to be a fount of living water. God is a mirage! Jeremiah, on the other hand, sees himself as faithful to God’s calling. How like Job this is!

God’s response is (unusual in Jeremiah) a call to repentance, a summons to return to the prophet’s “workbench”, to re-ingest that precious word of God which was formerly (v16) so delightful to him. Jeremiah has been faithful to God’s calling, and for him the result has been pretty painful. It certainly hasn’t won him any kind of popularity. Unlike Jesus, Jeremiah doesn’t go to parties (verse 17).

His consolation is in the assurance that “I am called by your name”. We might read this in a variety of ways. First, “your name” is a slightly uneasy way of avoiding the direct use of God’s name – which, of course, in the Jewish tradition, cannot be spoken. So, setting such scruples aside, it might mean “I am called by you, my God”. Alternatively, Jeremiah might intend us to understand that he, Jeremiah, is “called by (God’s) name”, meaning that his life is so fully consumed by the task God has given him that in a very limited sense he and God are (as) one. Either way, it is a marker of the high status of the prophet.

Ps 26:1-8

Here the psalmist’s words remind us of those of Jeremiah: called, faithful, profound in his love for God, yet behind these words is a puzzle: why does he ask God to vindicate him? It would seem that his uprightness of life is itself a vindication.

The writer of this psalm has surely latched onto one of the profoundest statements in the whole bible; we cannot come before God and plead our own virtue. Our acceptance by God rests not on our most strenuous efforts to be good, but simply on his grace.

Epistle Rom 12:9-21

St Paul would appear, here, to be setting out a radical programme for the upright life: hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Is Paul falling into the trap that the psalmist has both recognised and avoided? Not if we read this passage in the context of Romans as a whole. Paul is absolutely clear that it is only by faith in (i.e. by trusting in) the goodness of God that we are “saved” (that we reach a point of peace with ourselves and with God). At this point Paul has developed his theological arguments in support of this “by faith alone” position, and is now drawing out the implications for Christian living. A believer’s claim to be at peace with himself and with God, to be fully committed to being “in Christ” – such a claim can easily be tested against the lifestyle that should flow from it.

The object of the game of golf is to place a small ball in an artificially-created hole in a patch of close-cut grass. But the player is not allowed to achieve this

by the direct method of taking his ball and placing it in the hole with his own hand; he must use the set of clubs in his bag. He (or she) may claim to be an accomplished golfer, but if he (or she) is found placing the ball in the hole by hand the claim is exposed as fraudulent.

Gospel Matt 16:21-28

It has become fashionable recently to talk of “thinking outside the box”. Notable books have been written on this theme, not least by teachers and preachers of faith. Their theme has been one of bursting free from the confinements of habits of thought, language and practice in the life of the church. This reading tells a little story about the difficulties the followers of Jesus experienced in taking on board the conceptual challenges of what Jesus was saying to them. He predicted a violent death for himself. They could not accept this notion at all.

For one thing, the events Jesus was predicting didn't match the events they were expecting – a quasi-military triumph in which the Roman occupation would be ended and the rule of their traditional religion would be restored. But at a deeper level they were missing the message about the character of God – which is where this morning's readings began.

Comparing this with Paul's practical guidance on how to live as a Christian, we see that the objective Jesus had in mind for himself and his disciples could not be attained except by letting go of everything, even life itself.