

Lessons Exodus 3: 1 – 15 Romans 12: 9 – 21 St Matthew 16: 21 – 28

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Still us, O God, that we may be aware of Your Spirit, silently dwelling deep within our soul. Fill us to overflowing with Your silence. Amen.

The philosopher, palaeontologist, geologist and Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin composed most of his spiritual work in settings far removed from the university library. Many essays were written in the trenches of the First World War, in farmhouses and forests, and on boat journeys between Asia, America and Europe. Standing in the mystical tradition of religion, de Chardin saw the universe as more than an mere object of scientific enquiry: it was a reality which is alive, filled with energy and loved. In his essay *The Heart of Matter*, de Chardin said:

Throughout my life, by means of my life, the world has little by little caught fire in my sight, until a flame all around me, it has become almost luminous from within. Such has been my experience in contact with the Earth. The diaphany of the divine at the heart of the universe on fire. Christ, the heart, a fire capable of penetrating everywhere, and gradually spreading everywhere.

This is the sentiment we find in the ancient text of Exodus, in the encounter of Moses on Horeb, the mountain of God. This passage is biblical poetry at its most eloquent. Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro; he had wandered beyond the wilderness to the mountain. On Horeb an angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush: the bush was blazing but not consumed by the living flames. *Nec tamen consumebatur.*

Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight.' When the LORD saw Moses turn aside, God called to him out of the bush: 'Moses, Moses!' Moses replied, 'Here I am.' God said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. These six verses from the Book of Exodus are rich with meaning.

In the Jewish tradition, the angel which first appeared to Moses is said to be either Michael or Gabriel. Michael and Gabriel stood in the presence of God; their presence signified the nearness of the *Shekinah*, the nearness of the Holy One. In the birth narrative of

Jesus, in the Gospel of Luke, it is the angel Gabriel who visits Mary, who will very soon be the dwelling-place of the *Shekinah*.

In the Jewish tradition, it is said that there were others with Moses on Horeb but only Moses saw the fire. On the road to Damascus, only Paul saw the Risen Christ: mystical vision is an inner vision. Like Teilhard de Chardin, Moses saw a fire. Later in the Book of Exodus, on Mount Sinai, the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments, we are told the glory of the LORD, the presence of the Sacred, covered the mountain like 'a devouring fire'. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we read that Moses reminded the people of Israel that when they stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, the mountain was ablaze with flames to the very skies. Moses told the people that the LORD spoke out of the fire.

Why a fire? And why a bush? Fire can destroy but it also gives light, heat, energy and life. To the Jewish mind, it represented the Divine Presence which was transcendent (beyond this world), awesome and unapproachable. Fire represented the holiness of God. And the bush: no detail is ever insignificant. The Hebrew word for bush is *seneh*: it can be rendered bush or Sinai. It is possible that the word

points us forward to Moses encounter with God on Mount Sinai. In the Jewish tradition, it is said that God chose the bush, a thorn-bush, to show that nothing, not even an insignificant plant, is void of the *Shekinah*, the Presence of the Holy One. For those with eyes to see, the world of matter, the entire universe, is filled with the fire of God.

Only one detail in the story is repeated. Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight.' When the LORD saw Moses turn aside, God called to him out of the bush. On our spiritual journey, it is only when we have a hunger for the *Shekinah*, a craving to taste eternity, and a requisite discontent for this world, that we will turn aside with an urge for inner growth. Moses stopped and said, 'I must look.' It was only when he stopped and looked that he saw and heard. Within the rhythm of our life, if not every hour of every day, we need to find a pattern of spiritual exploration that works for us, of turning aside, looking with the inner eye, and listening with the ear of the heart.

For me, there is a parallel in the Moses' story with that of Jesus in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. God, the *Shekinah*, calls to Moses by repeating his name: 'Moses, Moses'. In the Gospel story, Jesus

says to Martha: 'Martha, Martha'. Moses knelt before the *Shekinah*, the Presence, as did Mary before Jesus. Jesus is the Divine *Shekinah*.

Through the entire encounter of God with Moses, we arrive at God's purpose for revealing God's Self. The mystical vision may have been the most profound and life-changing spiritual encounter but it was not an end in itself. God said, 'I have heard the misery of my people.....and I have come down to deliver them.' The Eternal, the Transcendent, the *Shekinah*, Yahweh, the Holy One who is unapproachable, is truly a God of compassion, a Mystery to be found in the midst of suffering, a God who says that things do not have to be the way they are!

In the Gospel of St Matthew, Jesus said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan!' Harsh, brutal words! To Jesus, Satan was very real, very present and a true threat to His soul. In the third century CE, the ascetic, Anthony, a spiritual giant of the Church, taught his monks to picture Satan as the most intimate enemy of all, an enemy who speaks through our inner thoughts and impulses, through imagination and desire. The reformer, Martin Luther, believed that life was a spiritual battle with Satan. In one of his hymns, he wrote of

lying chained in the devil's dungeon. Luther said that we are like a donkey, at times ridden by God and at other times by the Devil. In the Bible, Satan is almost always the enemy within.

The Chief Rabbi Emeritus, Jonathan Sacks, says that there are three kinds of evil. The first evil is in the natural world, such as the tectonic plates which cause earthquakes and tsunamis. The second is that which humans commit against each other and the third is that which we commit against ourselves. The second and third evil, those we commit against others and against ourselves, are there because God created us with free will and freedom comes at a high price. Our freedom to choose and shape our future is what makes us what we are. Satan is the enemy within. Jesus says that to Peter: 'Get behind me, Satan.'

Sacks says that we are moral decision-makers: we have a choice. To some extent at least we can shape the world we live in and, what is more, God would have us rage against injustice, evil and suffering wherever we encounter it, even if that brings us into conflict with those who speak in His Name. From the Bible's very beginning, from that encounter with Moses on Horeb, God is always a God of

compassion. When Jesus confronts Peter it is because Peter is prepared to accept injustice, oppression, evil and suffering in the world and to do so for his own safety and gain. In seeking to protect Jesus from death, Peter was thinking about his own skin.

Rabbi Sacks tells a joke:

There is a Jewish joke, a tragic one. The time, 1938, the place, a travel agency in Germany. A Jew has entered. He tells the woman at the desk that he would like to buy a ticket for a foreign journey. 'Where to?' asks the travel agent. 'What are you offering?' asks the Jew. The travel agent passes him a globe. He turns the globe slowly, looking at country after country, knowing that each has closed its doors to people of his faith. He pushes the globe back to the travel agent with the words, 'Don't you have another world?'

Satan is the enemy within. God said to Moses, 'I have seen how my people have been oppressed by the Egyptians. Go to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt.....I will be with you.' Today, in the face of misery, injustice and oppression, in this city, in this country and abroad, God says to the Church, to us, 'Go to Pharaoh and free my people! I will be with you.'

Amen.