**8th September 2013**

**Exodus 3:1–15**

This time of year students are getting ready to start at university. When I first arrived at University at the end of fresher’s week the Christian Union had a big evangelistic meeting. I was getting ready to go out to it when the guy in the flat opposite me said ‘where are you going?’ I said ‘oh I’m just off out.’

‘Out where. ‘

‘I’m going to a meeting’

‘What sort of meeting?’

‘A big meeting - to hear a speaker – lecture kind of thing’

‘O what’s it on?’

‘Well, err - the Christian faith’ – I said coughing

‘Well I’m not doing anything he said. Can I come with you?’

‘Err, well - are you sure – it might not be your cup of tea.’

‘Let me be the judge of that’ he said.

Mike came along to that meeting, was absolutely enthralled at the event and the message. He said he met God there and at the end of the meeting accepted the invitation the preacher gave to receive Christ into his life.

I was utterly gob smacked. Mike left university in his first year to go and help in inner city London. He wanted to get involved with the poor. He then felt he should devote his life to working with the world’s poor and went back to University – this time at Birmingham –to study development issues. Last I heard he was out in India.

Never underestimate what God can do with our pathetic attempts at witnessing to the gospel.

I start with this story for one of two reasons. Our bible passage for today is about how God met with Moses. More about that in a moment.

The second reason is because this autumn in our church fellowship groups and in some sessions called ‘Fishing: how to share your faith without annoying people’ we are going to be looking at how we can help other people find faith and meet with God. Most people aren’t good at sharing their faith. We are British: we get awkward about sharing what we may consider private matters and beliefs. We live in a society where the perceived opinion is that is it uncool to go to church and a bit weak or stupid to have a faith. Our perceptions of what people think about us makes us more defensive. I would argue, that is partly of our own making because we don’t challenge received attitudes.

I think this church is great. I know I’m biased. But I am proud to belong here – I love what we are trying to do. I know we are not perfect, we make mistakes but on the whole it’s a great adventure. Faith in Jesus is a great adventure, why should I be embarrassed about sharing that? Yet I often am and I need to reflect on why that is. Partly I wish I had the right words to share at the right time. These sessions and the house fellowships will be hopefully giving us more confidence in finding the right words and greater confidence in humbly sharing what we hold dear. What do you say when someone asks you what you are doing on Sunday? Or like my story about Mike – what meeting are you going out to tonight? What would you say if someone asked you why do you go to church, why do you believe in god, or how you came to hold this faith.

Evangelism has this bad reputation of people forcing their beliefs down someone else’s throats and I would not intend to encourage you or I to take that approach. I much prefer the description that it is about one begger showing another begger where to find bread.

We have been blessed here at the Tab and I strongly believe God wishes to bless us even more, and now is a time of harvest – but God needs workers – people who will not remain silent, but who will speak up of the good news we have and share in open dialogue with others about where we can find bread.

Going back to the first reason for starting with the story of Mike is that it links into today’s story where Moses met with God on holy ground. Mike encountered God. A God he had only vaguely knew about through odd childhood experiences and snatches of folk religion. In a burning bush type of experience he met with God and his life got changed.

Moses meets with God in our passage today in Exodus 3.

Last week we heard how women help ensure Moses’ survival, safety, and education. As an adult, Moses killed an Egyptian while defending the life of a Hebrew slave, then fled to Midian.

That is one of the shocks of this story. Moses is a murderer. Moses killed someone. Despite this shocking fact, God is going to call him and use him in his purposes. There are other murderers in the bible. Think of David. Think of Paul. Yet they too were not ruled out of God’s purposes because of what they had done. There is always the possibility of redemption in God’s sight. All God needs is a repentant heart and a desire to follow.

Moses has run away from Egypt in order to save his life. Maybe the guilt he carries enables him at this moment for God to redeem that life and put it to the purpose of saving other lives.

Moses has fled and seeks anonymity herding sheep in Midian.

It is here that God calls Moses. Moses met God at Mt. Horeb, or Mt. Sinai, a place that features repeatedly in the Exodus story. Mt. Sinai was uniquely associated with God’s presence. God’s presence at the site made the ground holy, giving land a spiritual significance. Perhaps we have places which we associate with God’s presence more than others.

Cathedrals, beauty spots, places of rest, and retreat, places of prayer and contemplation. This is Holy ground.

Maybe you have encountered or felt close to God at the top of a mountain, or walking in the fields. Maybe you have felt close to God at a particular moment of life, the birth of a child, a moment of crisis, round a hospital bed. Have you stood on holy ground where you have felt the presence of God, where you felt a conviction, an insight, a call? Holy ground.

God speaks to Moses out of a burning bush. He has to take off his sandals to approach. God says ‘*I have seen the affliction of my people and heard their cry. I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them’.*

This is the second shock of the passage. God has finally heard the cries of suffering. But how many lives have been lost. How many children have died. How many have been made slaves before some action, some liberation. The people of Syria maybe asking the same thing.

The cry of God’s people has finally been heard. How could God simply sit stony hearted as if deaf. Actually God often sits as if stonyhearted or deaf. The Israelites weren’t the only people suffering at the hands of imperial power in Moses day, but God did not rescue them and that pattern has continued over the centuries. How many of you have wondered when will God hear my cries? It seems like God is deaf. Do you not care? There is many an angry rant in the Bible. Strangely it is a sign of a strong relationship and a secure relationship if you can get angry with your nearest and dearest and they still put up with you. You can express your frustration and know that the relationship is strong enough to cope with the outburst.

Ray Davey the founder of the Corrymeela Community told the story of Peter Hartley who was a prisoner of war in one of the awful Japanese camps. He told of the incredible ordeal of suffering he and his fellow prisoners passed through, building a railway in the jungle. Then one day he found that he simply couldn’t go on, his body was powerless with fever and a few days later he suffered a crippling attack of dysentry. The doctors did all they could, but as the days passed he grew weaker and weaker. By the tenth day his spirit began to sink.. He had no fight left and he was sure that he was dying. Then he began to pray that the end would come quickly.

Next morning he described how the orderly brought in the mail. He watched the letters being distributed without interest or curiosity. What use were letters now to a man about to die?

What use were they, months or even years out of date.

Then suddenly the orderly threw a small packet of letters on

his bed and said: ‘*somebody must love you, sergeant, to send all that lot’*.

Hartley made no reply. He was debating whether he would look at them. This went on for several minutes and then suddenly he sat up and grabbed them. The first letter was from his mother. It described the tremendous relief they all had when it was reported that he was alive and a prisoner of war. This brought home to him how much those at home had suffered and how much they looked forward to his return.

That did it. Now he knew that he must survive and go back to them. So he fought for his life and slowly recovered. And eventually he got home.

The power in the words of those letters saved his life. They reassured him that people knew of his suffering and cared. It would still be years before he would be released but the letters gave him hope.

God hears the cries of the poor – we plead for change and for justice – it seems as though our cries are not heard – yet God’s word assures us of God’s concerns and these words, this Word, may it give us hope.

The Hebrews were not able to initiate liberation by themselves, as Pharaoh’s oppression had taken its toll. A greater power was needed. Sometimes people are trapped in lifestyles and attitudes and habits and they don’t have the power in themselves to break free. They need a higher power. God called Moses, warned him, made him a partner in the liberation of the Hebrews, and offered him a relationship with God.

A reluctant Moses responded. Moses accepts his task when God’s identity is convincingly established.

Moses discerns that the God of his ancestors has called him to liberate the people.

All our callings, our dreams and visions need discernment and critical reflection. Moses asks for verification: who is sending me? Who is going with me? What help will you give me? How will you overcome my shyness and inability to be articulate before powerful men? These are all the questions Moses asks as part of the discernment of his call.

God gives God’s name. This passage is the only place in the Hebrew Scriptures where God is identified by the holy name “I am who I am,” which can also be read as “I will cause to be.” This understanding fits very well with God being involved and active in the Hebrews’ liberation. God is the source of salvation.

God’s call changed Moses’ life completely. God’s name ‘I am who I am’ challenges us to reach inside ourselves – ‘who are we?’

‘Who am I?

‘What is my deepest desire?

Am I loved – what is my worth; what is my purpose?

These are deep questions that go to the heart of our existence. Answering them is to find our true calling.

Moses killed a man because he was moved to righteous anger at his mistreatment of one of the Hebrew slaves. His deepest desire was for compassion and for justice and freedom. When God confronted Moses in the Burning Bush and commissioned him to be his agent of liberation for the Hebrews – God was making Moses face up to who he really was – what his deepest desire was. It was a desire that was in line with God’s desire for freedom and justice.

We will only be free and fulfilled when our desires line up with God’s desires – that way we will be working with the grain and not against the grain of our souls.

Does God’s word come to us today? In every age there has been a vast procession of those who have heard God’s word and answered it. But for the most of us God doesn’t come in dreams or visions, or burning bushes but in ordinary events. Albert Schweizer described how the call to missionary work in West Africa to those suffering with leprosy came to him in a newspaper article. God comes through our listening and thinking, through beauty and goodness, through our inner longings and hopes, through our friends and through strangers, through our needs and fears and so many other unexpected ways.

At this time of year when organisations start up again after the summer break, autumn programmes get into full swing, schools are back, firms plan up to Christmas, people get busy and feel busy and feel burdened once more. There is always stuff you have to do; Stuff you’d like to do; stuff you don’t want to do. Can we discern through all that demanding maze,

what we are **called to do**? Can we discern the still small voice of the call of God?

A call though is not an invitation. It is more of a summons. It presupposes the relationship of a master and a servant. So in one sense it is not designed to be a way for the servant to find fulfilment, nor something the servant has an option about.

I kind of wonder whether Moses ever regretted paying attention to a burning a bush. He could have saved himself a lot of trouble by simply thinking ‘that bush is weird. Must move on and get some good grass for the sheep’.

God’s leaders often get drafted. In politics you have to run for election by the people. Moses runs from election by God. Being governed by people who want to exercise power is worrying. The person who leads has to be dragged into a position of leadership: it is a suggestive idea. There are few volunteers among the leaders of Israel or the leaders of the early church.

It is shocking that God doesn’t mind overriding people’s wishes and inclinations when a bigger picture requires it. Not that God does it often. But sometimes in life at some particular moment – you get the call.

The final shock about this call of Moses is that God then tries to kill him. Moses sets off back to Egypt in chapter 4 with his wife Zipporah. In verse 24 we are told that as they camped for the night God would have killed Moses but his wife quickly circumcised their son and touched Moses’ genitals with the knife. It is a bizarre passage. Shocking.

In one sense God has killed the old Moses. His old life has to go if he is to fulfil his new vocation.

God had made a covenant with Abraham long ago. Had God forgotten those promises? God had not been mindful of the covenant promises. Moses had not been mindful of the covenant sign of circumcision. God is now serious about the covenant and calls for that to be reciprocated by Moses.

There are times in life when you can just sail along, without a care in the world. But then there are times when a seriousness is demanded of you, a call to intentional living. Is that what is going on here? Once again Moses owes his life to a woman’s initiative!

God still stands with and on behalf of the most vulnerable people. When people call out for justice, God hears and responds, often through the hearts and hands of God’s people. There are still “pharaohs” who oppress and enslave. Who is going to bring good news? Who is going to liberate and set free those caught in despair, those with no hope?

‘Who am I’ said Moses.

‘Who are we?’

God answered Moses, as God answered most people in scripture who God called to do stuff: ‘I am with you’

‘I am with you’