

Third Sunday of Lent, Year C

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15

Ps 102

1 Corinthians 10:1-6,10-12

Luke 13:1-9

Our first reading this weekend presents us with one of the most famous and commented-upon texts in the entire Bible. You might even say that we're on holy ground as we approach this text.

In Exodus 3:14 we are presented with God's very own self-definition – God himself telling us his name. Countless saints and theologians have paused to pray with this very significant passage of Scripture.

The setting is familiar. Moses, in exile from his native Egypt, finds himself on Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb. He's tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro. Suddenly, the angel of the Lord (which in this case is a euphemism for the very presence of God) appears to him in the form of a bush that was *on fire, but not consumed*.

Displaying his typical confidence, Moses walks over to the bush, saying, "I must go over and see why the bush is not burned." Right away, those of us familiar with the Bible are probably a little nervous. Why? Because right from the beginning in Genesis, we know that trying to know and control God is a recipe for trouble. It is not our place to go running up to God, saying "Let me look at this!" Rather, we should let God come to us on his own terms.

Seeing Moses coming over, God upbraids him, saying "Come no nearer; take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." There's powerful symbolism in this command to take off his shoes. If you think about it, with protective footwear on, we can walk with confidence over just about any terrain – grass, sand, gravel, rock, etc. But if we're barefoot, we have to tread much more carefully, we're much more cautious – because we know we're vulnerable. So this is entirely appropriate in the presence of God – to remove our protective and defensive trappings, to let ourselves know our need of the Almighty, and to be willing to receive instruction from him.

As an aside, it's for these same reasons that, during the most solemn moments of the Catholic liturgy, we adopt the posture of kneeling – and in special instances, we even prostrate ourselves on the ground. We know that we're in the presence of something far beyond our grasp, and beyond our ability to control. When the Lord comes close, we need to approach him with an awareness of our own creatureliness, and with deep respect. Otherwise, we would make ourselves incapable of encountering him and entering into communion with him.

So, with Moses having removed his shoes and assuming a stance of greater receptivity, God—speaking through the burning bush—now reveals himself as the same divine power who had long ago addressed his ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God further tells Moses that he’s heard the cry of his people in Egypt, and that he wants Moses to lead the liberation effort. Moses initially baulks at this, conscious that he would not seem to be the ideal candidate. But then as he warms to the idea, he asks God what his name is.

Now, in this, Moses is asking a perfectly reasonable question for his time. People worshipped lots and lots of gods in the ancient world – the god of a mountain, the god of a sea, the god of a particular tribe. So Moses is essentially asking, “Well, which one are you?” Moses knows this is the god of his ancestors, so he’s got to have a name, right?

However, as we see, the God of the burning bush basically evades the question – “I am who I am” doesn’t really tell you much! In fact, it sounds like the sort of thing a cheeky teenager might say! But the fact that this doesn’t tell us much I think is actually very important.

The true God—as opposed to all the false gods of the ancient world—is not someone who can be captured, or defined, or categorised by our limited minds. The moment we name someone or something, we put that person or thing into our schema of knowledge – we find a place for this person or thing wherever they seem to best fit. We compare and contrast them with other persons or things, we try to define them, and so forth.

If I introduce myself to someone, “Hi, I’m Fr Mark Baumgarten” – straight away they have all sorts of knowledge about me. There’s two names that they can put into google and find out all sorts of things. And he’s a priest – that probably implies all sorts of things. In a matter of moments I’m being categorised, evaluated, labelled – that’s just how our brains work. If you’re in earshot, you can call me with my name, and I’ll almost definitely respond. Knowing a name is knowing a lot.

But here’s the thing – *we can’t do this with God*. Why not? Because the creator and sustainer of everything that is and ever will be is not simply another object within our universe. He is categorically different from anyone or anything we’ve ever experienced. St Thomas Aquinas spoke of God not as the highest being, but as the very act of being itself!

In theory we can name any created thing – from your pet dog to a distant galaxy. But the creator of all that is simply can’t be placed onto any schema of understanding that we are capable of conceiving. God can’t be defined. He can’t be compared with anything else we know. And so he can’t be named the way we name anything else.

Now this is all a little bit abstract, so let’s bring this back down to our Exodus narrative. The burning bush is on fire, but not consumed, not destroyed. God is

present to it in the most powerful way, but nothing of the bush has to give in order for God to work through it and in it.

Compare this to the arrival of the gods in the Greek and Roman myths. In those stories, when the gods burst into human affairs, people are often destroyed in the process! Something in the world has to give in order for this more powerful worldly being to appear. When the gods in these stories want what they want, we have to give something up, and satisfy them by sacrificing something that we have.

You can see now how these ancient gods were thought of as nothing more than powerful beings *within the world*. But when the true God comes close—such as in this encounter with the burning bush—things are not destroyed. In fact, they become radiant and more beautiful.

What does this mean for us? St Irenaeus famously said that the glory of God is man fully alive. We are not in competition with the true God. And so the God who is not a being in the world—not simply one object among many—can relate to us in such a way that, through the encounter, we are enhanced and rendered more beautiful – just as the burning bush became radiant and radically alive. We can risk being vulnerable with the true God – because he is not in competition with us. It is no coincidence that the most common line in the Bible is “Do not be afraid.”

Note how Moses was sent from this divine encounter with the mission to liberate the Chosen People from their slavery in Egypt. The all-powerful God of the universe could very easily have disposed of the Egyptians in an instant and freed the Hebrews all by himself. But that’s not what he did – he chose to work through Moses. The true God—who is not a competitor in human affairs—delights in drawing us into his work, that we might taste the joy of it.

Picture a small boy wanting to help his father, who is sweeping the back verandah on a lazy afternoon. The father could get the job done far quicker and more efficiently on his own, but—if he’s in a good mood—he delights in sharing it with his son, who in turn is proud to be able to help out his Dad. It likely takes a lot longer, and they probably make a bit of a mess, but through this shared activity, the bond between them grows deeper.

God is a bit like this. It goes without saying that he would be far more efficient if he just did things by himself. But he wants to draw us in, to become co-operators in his mission, and so to grow deeper in love with him. So we need never think of God as some kind of rival, whose glory is in competition to our own well-being.

In the burning bush, Moses encountered the living God. What was once hidden is now made known. Moses was permitted to see God’s uncreated glory, and in doing so he caught a glimpse of the Infinite, a promise of eternal things to come. In this, Moses is a sign for us, that we are all made for the infinite, that our hearts are made for love, that we are created to be in communion with the Divine Majesty.

Friends, this is truly good news, and our present season of Lent is about preparing us to share in this good news for all time.