

3rd Sunday of Lent

Why was Moses on the slopes of Mount Horeb looking after his father-in-law's sheep? I am sure you remember the story of how, as a baby, he was saved from death by Pharaoh's daughter as he floated in a basket among the reeds. God had a special purpose for him. He would save his people from slavery. But Moses' hot temper seemed to put pay to this. He became angry when he saw an Egyptian overseer ill-treating one of his fellow Israelites and killed him. He fled in fear into the wilderness of Madian and began a new life. He was not only hiding to save his life but also hiding from God's plan and purpose for him.

God does not give up on Moses or his plan of salvation. As he minds the sheep God sends an angel to speak to Moses in the form of a voice from a burning bush – a bush on fire yet not being destroyed by it. Moses is curious and goes to investigate. Having got his attention God now speaks to Moses. He commissions him to take his life in his hands and return to Egypt. First he is to encourage his people and then to persuade Pharaoh to set his people free. The power of God will go with him and enable him to perform wonders. Eventually Moses will succeed in leading his people out of slavery and on a journey to the Promised Land. The God he encountered in the bush will go with them as a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. He will appear to Moses on Mount Sinai and give him the Ten Commandments – the Law for life in their new land. When they enter the Land he will be with them as a hidden presence in the Ark of the Covenant – first in a tent and later in the Temple in Jerusalem. This journey in faith, trusting in God's presence and providence was not an easy one. Many of the people got fed up with the journey and its trials. They regretted having left Egypt. They fell by the wayside.

We too are on a journey. We too have a calling from God – a place and task in his world that will be left empty and unfulfilled if we do not respond to his invitation and grace. The Church gives us the season of Lent and today's readings to help us wake up to where we are and where we are going. Jesus tells the parable in today's Gospel so that we will understand that people who suffer or die suddenly do not do so because they are especially bad people. He will himself be put to death at the age of thirty three! It is not so much the circumstances of our death that matter but whether we are ready to face God. Have we done what God asks of us?

Like Moses we can be afraid of God's intimacy or fear that he will ask too much of us. Silence and stillness – time given to prayer – is challenging. How many people do you see on public transport or in the street just taking in their surroundings or deep in thought? How many are so focussed on a mobile phone or tablet that they hardly know where they are going? We try to escape in short term pleasures and interests. Digital images and electronic contact can take the place of face to face relationships. Yet within ourselves we have a niggling feeling that somehow there ought to be more to life. No matter whom we speak to or follow through a device it is not the same as being with them in the flesh. In his poem 'the Hound of Heaven' Francis Thompson says: "All which I took from thee I did but take, Not for thy harms, But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms. All which thy child's mistake Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home; Rise, clasp My hand, and come!"

God is with us unseen all our lives, wherever we are, seeking us out, inviting us to respond, to discover and fulfil our destiny. We may not see a burning bush but our guardian angel constantly prompts us through the words of Scripture or simply of other people and through the circumstances of life encouraging us to see other ways ahead. Even when we go off the rails God does not abandon us. Next week we listen to the Parable of the Prodigal Son.