



Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 3 September 2023

READINGS

Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6,23-26,45; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

God's presence in our lives

Then he said, "Do not come any closer; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5)

So God says to Moses in the Old Testament reading set for this Sunday. What I wish to do this morning is to use this passage from Exodus as a springboard to think about the containment of God's presence in our lives and to ask some questions around where we believe God to be present or not be present.

If we cast our minds back to that idyllic epoch in human existence which was the pre-Covid world, people of faith, Christians, and perhaps most especially Anglicans, would have had their consciences pricked on a Sunday morning had they not put on their Sunday best and attended Mass. All of this changed during Covid. As churches were forced to close their doors, so they were compelled to create an online presence. And many churches which did so have since, whether due to lack of resources or whether due to their numbers returning to pre-Covid levels, have ceased producing online material.

But the transition made to an online presence during the hard lockdown raised some theological questions. Some parishes in their online liturgies tried to offer a form of Eucharistic prayer. This raised questions around the necessity of a priest being physically present to perform the words of consecration. On the other hand, while churches remained empty, people worshipped in their homes. Granted this may not be the ideal or preferred way for most people to worship but it nevertheless raises questions around where God is present.

Much of the world of the Old Testament is demarcated by the distinction between holy and profane. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the second temple in Jerusalem which was sadly destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. But you may recall that the temple consisted of concentric precincts with every smaller precinct more holier than the larger precinct which surrounded it, until one arrived at the Holy of Holies, which was the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle, which was believed to house God's presence, and into which only the High Priest was allowed and only once a year, on the day of Yom Kippur (or Day of Atonement).

There is a rather amusing story, whose factual basis is disputed, that the High Priest had to have a rope secured around his ankle. If for some reason the High Priest was struck down while performing his duties,

the bells at the end of his tassels would cease jingling and his colleagues would have to drag him out by the rope tied to his ankle. While most serious exegetes tell us there is no biblical basis for this story, it is helpful in illustrating the type of thinking which characterised the world of the Old Testament.

One of the main theological transitions we witness in the ministry of Jesus is around the question of God being present in the temple and God being present in the world at large. Jesus had some misgivings about the temple for this and other reasons which he vocalised and is probably why he occasioned the ire of the Jewish authorities. At his death we are told that the veil marking the threshold separating the inner sanctuary of the Holy of Holies from the outer chamber was torn in two, signifying God's presence extending into the outside world. Jesus had prophesied the temple's destruction, a prophecy which was fulfilled, as mentioned earlier, in 70 AD.

So the question remains: is there still a basis for considering some spaces and places as being more holier than others? Another area in which such questions crop up is around the de-consecration of churches, a procedure which is required before church properties are sold, and something which may be raised in the context of our upcoming Diocesan Synod.

We naturally think of churches as holy places, and the thought of the Old Testament undeniably informs the architecture of our churches. The sanctuary, which in some parishes only clergy and parish ministers are allowed to enter, is clearly demarcated. The sanctuary in turn houses the tabernacle which, as we saw in OT thought, contained God's presence. Likewise in Anglican churches, the tabernacle houses the consecrated elements, in other words, the presence of Christ himself. So even within our churches there are spaces which traditionally are demarcated as being holier than other spaces.

You may have the impression that all of this has been a bit speculative and theoretical so far. So to pose a question in conclusion, and this goes back to the questions raised by Covid and the advent of online worship in the first place, how and in what ways is God present for the average Anglican in 2023? Do we still need to enter churches to be standing on "holy ground" or, can we say that God is equally present with us when we watch services online?

As we continue to contemplate these things may God's hand of guidance, protection and blessing, remain upon you and those you love.

Amen