

SERMON AT GELORUP 30/8/2020: GEOFF CHADWICK
PENTECOST 13 (OS 22)
EXODUS 3:1-15 "I HERE"

Exodus 3.1-15

¹ Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

² There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

³ Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.'

⁴ When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.'

⁵ Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'

⁶ He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings,

⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.

¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'

¹¹ But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'

¹² He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

¹³ But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?'

¹⁴ God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you."'

¹⁵ God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you": This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations.'

Our dog Pippin loves to watch TV. She loves to watch the ball when the footy's on, and she particularly loves programmes which feature animals. Recently she wanted to attack the giant spider that features in Harry Potter. This only proves that she a braver dog than her master.

A funny thing happened the other night. There was a Cat called Pippin on the TV (the same name as our dog). The TV character began to call and whistle for the TV cat. What a great commotion this caused in our living room. Our dog, upon hearing her name along with the

whistle, immediately leapt up, attempted to enter the TV and then searched outside for the would-be caller!

Gabby and I have been training her to respond to her name and come to us with a whistle.

Little did we know that the TV would be just as effective!

You see, our dog, Pippin knows her name!

I know my name as well. There's a story that my mum loves to tell. When I was first learning to talk, there was an occasion when I refused to go to sleep. (This is an absolute aberration of my normal behaviour – these days I can sleep on a clothes-line! – or even during silent reading in class!) So anyway, my exasperated Mum had finally got me off to sleep. Then, my older sister who was prone to sleep-talking called out from her bedroom:

“Geoffrey!”

Immediately I sprang to life and uttered my first sentence:

“I here!” I called.

Not bad for my first two-word sentence!

Just what happened after that I've never been told, but one suggests my parents might have been a bit frustrated with a sleeping daughter who talks, and a talking son who won't sleep!

I wonder if you know what your first sentence was? Could I suspect:

“I hungry!” or

“No - No!....”

Words have power. And in our Old Testament story today we hear of the most powerful word that can't be spoken.

Moses, after encountering God in the burning bush, wants to know God's name. Remember he says:

¹³ ... 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' (Ex 3:13, NRSV)

But God refuses to reveal the name and makes a strange statement instead:

¹⁴ God said to Moses, 'I am who I am .' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." (Ex 3:14, NRSV)

God's is known as "I am."

This is a puzzling thing for Moses, after all he lived in Egypt where the god's names were infamous:

- AMUN-RA: The Hidden One. ...
- MUT: The Mother Goddess. ...
- OSIRIS: The King of the Living. ...
- ANUBIS: The Divine Embalmer. ...
- RA: God of the Sun and Radiance. ...
- HORUS: God of Vengeance. ...
- THOTH: God of Knowledge and Wisdom. ...
- HATHOR: Goddess of Motherhood.

Moses, however, is told "*I am*". This word in Hebrew is spelt YHWH, which no one really knows how to say because it was considered so holy that it was never spoken. It's known as the *tetragrammaton* (or four lettered word). Even today, in the Hebrew scriptures the *tetragrammaton* is often written as just four dots and the word *Adonai* or *LORD* is said in its place.

In honour of this convention, our Christian bibles usually translate the *tetragrammaton* (or four dots) as the four letters L.O.R.D. to make up the word *LORD* in capital letters. Where other names are used for God, our bibles tend to use *Lord* (lowercase) or *God* as the translation. Why not have a close look in your bible some time. Maybe you can run a

highlighter through *LORD* every time you see it. It will keep you busy as there are about 450 occurrences!

Incidentally, the Jehovah Witnesses say the real name for God is *Jehovah*, but unfortunately this is based on an incorrect medieval combination of the consonants YWHW with the vowels for *Adonai*. (Nevertheless, it is fruitless to get into an argument with them about this!)

So why all this mystery around the name of God?

It's simply this. The ancient people knew that to know the name of someone was to have power over them. I have power over Pippin, my dog, when I call her name (well most of the time). My sister had the power to wake me up when she called my name. The teachers here will also tell you that when you know the name of a student you have some sort of power over them! (Well most of the time!)

In the ancient world, to invoke the name of a god was considered an act of power. We still do that today when we pray in the *name* of Jesus. There are even non-religious examples such as the song *Stop In the name of love!*

So in this little encounter with Moses, God preserves his place of power. By reminding a mystery, God remains God. God is God.

God is not at our beck and call.

Curiously, the four dotted *tetragrammaton* does have some meaning. Whilst it can never be translated perfectly, it means something like: "*I am who I am*" or "*I will be who I will be*".

This relates to what the philosophers call *perfect being*. *God simply is. God exists. God is existence. God is all things and will be all things. God is all in all.*

We do well to remember this because there are times when we are all in danger of wanting to domesticate God. To make God the being who comes to us at our calling. To make God into an image we control.

Yes, God is at hand, yet we must remember that God is too wonderful for us!

In middle of the 20th Century, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth sought to re-establish the majesty and wonder of God. Following the atrocities of the Second World War he felt that many had attempted to domesticate God. According to him, It was time to re-discover God's divine majesty. In 1964 he wrote this famous quote:

This much is certain, that we have no theological right to set any sort of limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ. Our theological duty is to see and understand it as being still greater than we had seen before.

(Barth, 1964, The Humanity of God)

Barth's point was that we should let *God be God again*. Or as Moses encountered it: Let the *I am*, be the *I am*, and the *Will be*, be the *Will be*.

So maybe, we like Moses need to do a bit of fire-gazing. To turn aside from the routines of the day to attend to wonder and mystery:

³ *Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.'*

⁴ *When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.'* (Ex 3:3-4, NRSV)

Maybe we don't have to look very far. Wonder is everywhere – and if we pay attention, we might even hear God calling! And our response?

"Here I am -I here!"

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**