

## DISCOVERING GOD

The Israelites had come to be in Egypt many years before to escape famine in their own land. But they had since become so numerous that out of fear they had been treated as slaves. Egypt had escaped the famine because of the forethought and planning of Joseph, another Israelite sold to the Egyptians as a slave himself by his brothers.

Moses, who escaped the edict of the Pharaoh that all baby Israelite boys should be killed, has been brought up in the Pharaoh's household but never lost his sense of identity as an Israelite. One day he kills an Egyptian who is mistreating a fellow Israelite and then has to run for his life when word gets back to the Pharaoh about what he's done.

Decades later we find him as an elderly man, tending sheep. Perhaps he's reflecting on his lost opportunities, his dead-end life and the fact that God seemed to have abandoned his so-called chosen people to slavery in Egypt.

Maybe Moses said, as people often do today: 'I believe in *something*, but I'm not sure what'. That day he discovered the *someone* he could believe in: the **God at a distance, the God who comes close and the God who sends us out**.

### GOD AT A DISTANCE

When God calls, Moses is in a desert place, on a mountain, far from other people. Maybe you remember other Bible stories where the clearest revealing of God is in the desert or on a mountain: Abraham who is inches from sacrificing his son when a substitute is given; Moses receiving the ten commandments and the glory of God; Elijah hearing a still, small voice in the cave; the power of God to help Jesus overcome temptation in the wilderness; the disciples with Jesus when he's transfigured and they see not just a human being but the glory of God; the crucified Christ who will rise when he seems to have been forsaken...

At times, God can seem distant, far away. At times, we might be the ones keeping our distance. At times, we just have to be reminded that he is not the same as us. God is, in one sense, distant and rightly so.

Flames of fire attract Moses but there's a call: *Don't come any closer; take off your shoes; it's holy ground*. God is at a distance. Don't be casual, don't think you're the same. There was an earthquake at Mount Sinai, Elijah hid his face when he heard God; Isaiah in the temple shouted out 'Woe is me!...my eyes have seen the... Lord Almighty!' (*Isa. 6:5*); the disciples fell on their faces.

There are moments when you need to stand back, recognise you're not in the same league and this is one of them. Sometimes we should take off our shoes, as it were, and remember not to treat him casually. So Moses hides his face. He cannot look at God. They are not equals. There has to be respect. So it should be, at times, for us, as we recall just who this God is. He is not the same. He is God at a distance.

### GOD WHO COMES CLOSE

But this God does not stay at a distance. He is the God who comes close. God the extraordinary comes to Moses in something very ordinary - a bush. Will you look at things and people more closely to see where the signs of God exist today? (We think of prayer as what we do in church or when we're sitting asking him to help us but prayer is about being aware and turning the awareness of our world into prayer - what we see in the news, or on the faces of people we pass, or in the buildings we enter or the buses we travel on. God comes right in there.)

Moses listens and when God speaks, God is the one who comes close. *'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'* (v.6). It becomes personal: I'm the God you've known about from the figures of your history and from your own life. It's me - don't you recognise me? I'm here! This old man who has lost heart and perhaps feels he's let his own people down because he ran away, needs encouragement that the same God is still with him.

That's how God is- huge, different, awesome, but coming close.

*I met up with a friend a couple of weeks ago. We chatted, whilst we waited for his wife and children to arrive. In the distance, still a few hundred metres away, Alan spotted them. His 4 year old son was running, so Alan stood up and went to the end of the path. Alan is a man of fierce intellect, firm ideas and probing questions. Alan is also well over 6 feet tall and when he stretched out his arms they were like huge tree branches! He stood like that, arms raised out to encourage Sam to keep on running and then stooped down to scoop him up into his arms. A little domestic scene that's repeated in thousands of places every day. But perhaps it also speaks about how God would be with us: towering, fierce, daunting perhaps, powerful next to a small child running from a distance, but delighting in stooping down to wrap us up as close as we dare to come.*

So God makes it personal for Moses and then tells him, with a flurry of verbs about how active he is: *I have seen the suffering...I have heard the crying...I am concerned...I have come down (to save)...I have seen (what the enemies are doing) ...I am sending you.*

God comes close. He knows. It's almost repeated just a few chapters later in chapter 6 when we hear God say *'I will bring you out, I will free you, I will redeem, I will take you as my own (echoes of Revelation 21 there) , I will be your God, I will bring you to the land, I will give it to you...'*

When we are tempted to ask if anybody really knows what is going on in our lives, or if anyone is bothered or if there is anyone who can really do anything, the answer here is that God cares and acts. And he seals it by saying : I AM. This is the God who really exists, with real knowledge of the situation, with real love for the people, with real power to make a real difference. He has not gone out of the picture and he proved it more than ever before when Jesus himself got more involved in human life and joys and hurts and death.

## **GOD WHO SENDS US OUT**

So we see God at a distance, God coming close and now we see the God who sends out.

Go! says God (v.10) You're the one I'm sending to do this with me. What a massive ask! This man is thought to have been about 80 years old when God gave him the job. Remember how he'd killed a man, run away, married into foreign people, ended up rearing sheep. I expect he could regularly be prone to shame, guilty memories, anger, worthlessness. God calls him.

God calls lots of people who we wouldn't choose, lots of people who wouldn't put themselves forward. Isn't that good news? God sees things and people differently. That passion of Moses, that anger, that desire to do something to change the world, that inside knowledge of Egypt, the understanding of the desert....all useful for the next phase of life, all valuable to God, whatever others might think. God sends us out.

You may not think you've got the qualifications. If it's all about you making a success of things, then what you've done up to now really matters. But if you've got God saying (as he does in v.12) *'I will be with you'* then you have what you need and the rest doesn't really matter quite so much.

Jesus sent his disciples out *'As the Father sent me, so I send you'* and his spirit was with them and that was what mattered.

So we find Moses being shown who God is. A God who is powerful and holy with no compassion would be frightening. A God with compassion but no power would be helpless. A God who does everything himself would make us feel useless. A God who does nothing would be a waste of time!

Moses faces the biggest challenge of his life knowing the God who is distant, the God who comes close and the God who sends people out to work with him, for the good of all.

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