

Trinity 1, Sunday 14th June 2020

Collect

God of truth, help us to keep your law of love and to walk in ways of wisdom, that we may find true life in Jesus Christ your Son. Amen

Exodus 19:2-8a

After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

³Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, 'This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶you^[a] will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.'

⁷So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. ⁸The people all responded together, 'We will do everything the LORD has said.'

Romans 5:1-8

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we^[b] boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³Not only so, but we^[c] also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. ⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and illness. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'

¹⁰ Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and illness. ²These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

⁵These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷As you go, proclaim this message: "The kingdom of heaven has come near." ⁸Heal those who are ill, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy,^[a] drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

Reflections

Today we see an interesting set of readings. Exodus sees Moses at Sinai – if you have ever been there, it is a fairly non-descript peak of granite amidst other higher peaks. Unlike the forbidding snows and frozen rock faces of the Alps, Sinai's menace lies in the sheer inhospitality of the surrounding Sinai desert. It's just hot rock (and I don't mean Jimmi Hendrix!) If you see it, you will understand why the Israelites complained about their wanderings in the desert.

It's in this environment that the Israelites have camped and await further instructions from their leader Moses. He goes up the mountain to receive words from God. He comes back with the most extraordinary proposition – God made the whole world, He is King of creation, BUT – God wants YOU to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, special, to be a blessing to the world. All you need do is keep the commandments. An amazing offer.

So what does it mean to be a priest?

The OED states 'an ordained minister of the Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglican Church, authorized to perform certain rites and administer certain sacraments'.

Rather dry and Eurocentric.

Wikipedia is much more dynamic - 'a person authorized to perform the sacred rituals of a religion, especially as a mediatory agent between humans and one or more deities, also having the authority to administer religious rites.

'A mediatory agent between humans and one or more deities'. A lot more inclusive, and a lot more explicit on what being a priest entails. The people of Israel were to be a whole kingdom of priests, mediating between humanity and the divine in a unique way. They were there to hold the world in the presence of God, intercede on its behalf, teach God's wisdom, proclaim the knowledge of the Lord. And initially they are up for it!

So what happened? Many did not keep their part of the deal 'if you keep my commandments' – not if you *try* to keep my commandments. The words leave no room for soft soaping – if you obey me fully and keep my commandments. Some managed it; the majority did not. It was just too hard.

Fast forward a couple of millennia. Israel has become a troublesome but strategic province of the Roman empire. The people still worship at the temple, but have all but forgotten their deal with God. Where is that response 'everything that the Lord has spoken we will do'?

In today's Gospel, Jesus has been working his way through the local towns, healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching the good news of his kingdom. The people are likened to sheep without a shepherd ... they do not know where to go or what they are doing. They have totally lost sight of their original calling – a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Bit by bit Jesus sets about restoring that vision. He starts with his 12 disciples and gives them a job to do, starting with where they are at – not too far afield, just the locals at first. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons and proclaim the good news – the kingdom of heaven has come near. Gradually the vision is restored, until St Peter can write:

'... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'. 1 Peter 2:9

It is our calling to hold the spiritual nucleus of the communities with which we are involved, to intercede on their behalf, to touch them with God's love, to bring God's kingdom into the lives of all whom we encounter, to be a part of God's redeeming work on this earth. In the midst of the current pandemic tragedy and all the related fallout, we may well ask 'Why did God let this happen?' I don't know the answer to that question, but I DO know that God is here through his people, his kingdom of priests. Somehow God IS here, sharing the pain. He is here in the fear and the grief. He is here in the dedication and heroism of our key workers. He will continue to be here redeeming the sorrow and pain in every act of kindness, love and solidarity as we try to make sense of what is happening.

And he is here through us, when we embrace our responsibility to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests as we mediate between God and this messy, broken world through our prayers, love and actions.

Rev Jenny Ellis