

Exodus 33:12-23

Just inside the city walls, in Padua, there is a Chapel. Nothing very startling, from the outside, brick built, no bigger than our Lord Mayor's Chapel and much plainer. Walk through the door and you step into heaven. Scrovegni's Chapel is covered in frescoes and the presiding colour is a brilliant blue. Your first impression is that you have fallen into the sky, but then you begin to take in the pictures on the walls, a medieval strip cartoon of salvation, forty frescoes by Giotto - the birth and marriage of the Virgin Mary and the life of Christ. The Birth at Bethlehem, the flight into Egypt, Cana, Lazarus, The Last Supper, the Betrayal...

When you stand in the Chapel that story surrounds you, you have got right inside it.

Now, when I was appointed Dean of Bristol, kind friends gave me things, presents, bits of advice. My Bishop gave me a red stole because I did not have one, quite a lot of people gave me bottles of wine despite the fact that I had one already, but I didn't mind. I was a Dean with a red stole, claret and an alarming book called *I'll show them whose boss*. It's one of those *the thing you really need to know is...* books, the key to unlocking potential. It has a subtitle: *the six secrets of successful management*. We like this stuff, we like the idea that there is a key to unlock the riddle, a thing you can do to make it turn out right: Ten things you need to know about Ebola. Five secrets of successful weight loss, the eighty six tricks of a high-performing Dean. We want the blueprint, we want *The Secret of Success*.

Scripture never does this for us. The lawyer asked Jesus 'Lord what must I do to inherit eternal life' and Jesus did not hand him a papyrus pamphlet, *The seven secrets of eternity*, he told him a parable. Jesus consistently left us with questions. He called us, he did not direct. We need to notice that the gospels are very light on commandments. Over lunch you can discuss how many specific instructions Jesus gives us: I can think of three: Love God, Love your neighbor, and do this in remembrance of me'.* What scripture gives us instead is a story. Jesus lives our life, so that we can live it in turn. He shows us what being human is, so that we can try to be human ourselves. And that, it seems to me, is precisely what Giotto understood when he painted the Scrovegni Chapel. He painted a story that you can get inside.

Once we have understood the idea that there are some stories we need to learn we can begin to make sense of that reading from Exodus we heard; make sense of some pretty mystifying prose.

I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious

We sell the Book of Exodus short. Just another book in the Old Testament; there's Genesis, the prophets, the psalms; there are histories and there is Exodus. Actually, Exodus is *the* story in the Old Testament. If you want the key, the thing you really need to know, this is it. When the Jews created their first creeds Exodus was the story they told,

The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, Deuteronomy 26:8

Exodus is the story you have to know, the story about power and slavery and freedom. It is the *controlling* story, it is a story and a map. We assume it is simply an account of what happened to the Jews in Egypt and after they left Egypt. In fact, awful lot of Exodus was not shaped and written down for something like six hundred years. This story began to be told in the way we know it now when Jews were enslaved all over again, in Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar. It is a story about power and slavery and freedom that you tell again and again, because it explains things.

Let's just remind ourselves how it goes. The Jews in Egypt are enslaved; not just enslaved, they live in a place where everyone tells you that resources are scarce, that struggle is essential, that you have to grab opportunity because opportunity is rare. Although they live in a land of plenty they must make bricks without straw and their babies are put to death depleting the very workforce that Pharaoh needs. Scarcity

is king. Now contrast that with the story of the wilderness. The wilderness is not a place of plenty at all. If you want scarcity this is what it looks like, and yet it is here that the Lord provides for Israel generously. Manna and quails pour down them. Notice what happens. People brought up to believe in scarcity, try to stockpile what God gives them. They have been specifically told not to do that, but they do it anyway, they think that unless you can lock something up you cannot be sure of it. This is the story Exodus tells, it is an account of the condition we create, our fixation on getting more stuff, extending the credit, having something for a rainy day. It is an account of people who believe in scarcity, not generosity or provision.

And then there is something else. In the wilderness, still anxious about scarcity, the Israelites began to believe that God has made himself scarce, is not where they need God to be. So they make the golden calf. That is Exodus 32. We heard Exodus 33, the story that comes after the carnage when Moses discovered the golden calf. Exodus 33 begins by telling us that

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Exodus 33:7

Aaron's golden calf was in the middle of the camp. They made offerings to it and then had a party in front of it. Moses now seeks the God of Israel somewhere further off. God, remember has promised the Jews that he will be their God. *I will be with you*, he has said, *I will establish my covenant with you*. It is the great promise. Faith depends on the fact that God can be found, it really matters that, somehow, God is with us. Jesus, remember is just that: Emmanuel, God with us. But here, in Exodus, Moses pitches the tent of meeting – the place where you meet God – at a distance.

And there, in the tent of meeting, Moses asks to see God,

Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you

And, because Moses is indeed holy and upright the Lord agrees, but says something rather striking

I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious,

As a grammatical construction it is circular, *I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious* - (if you like technical terms it's an *idem per idem*). When Moses met God at the burning bush there was another example: *I am who I am*. It is a shorthand way of expressing that God is not like anything else, he is gloriously himself. And, because he is not *like* anything else, even Moses cannot finally come close.

"you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."

And this a second part of the controlling story of Israel, the story we are supposed to learn. Our God must never be confused with anything else.

If I say that we have a fundamental instinct to commit idolatry, I fear that I might rather hurt your feelings. Good people that you are, you will remind me that you have never melted down your mother-in-law's jewelry in the aga and made a golden calf, you have never set up an abomination of desolation in the back bedroom, and never sacrificed a baby to Moloch on the allotment. Idolatry always seems such a very dramatic, showy sort of sin, the sort of thing done by people in hot climates on feverish days.

The story Exodus tells suggests something rather different. It is a story in which the dread of scarcity stalks the land. That's the dread that has us reaching for our credit cards or going to the Wonga website. It's the dread that acquires possessions and then has to keep them safe. If you believe in scarcity, you will always settle for less, because less is all that there is.

And it is the fear of scarcity that prompts idolatry, drives me to settle for the thing that I can touch and see rather than to long for a God I can never possess. We settle for less, the thing we can have not the glory that created it. When C S Lewis wrote about idolatry he said this

beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.[†]

Why does this matter so much? Why is this the great story that Exodus needs to tell? Well, partially because the business of settling for less is a counsel of despair. If the god to which I bow down is prosperity, success or revenge you might be a little bit sorry for me if I was never successful, prosperous, or triumphant. You should be more sorry if I achieved any of those things and discovered I had no more hope, no vision of a greater glory. Our idols do not disappoint because they are out of reach, they disappoint precisely because we might meet them and discover they offer so little. The God of Exodus, the God on whom even Moses cannot look will always speak of a mystery we cannot fathom. Here we will always have news of a country we have not visited.

There is another problem and I believe it to be something that should concern us. We seem to be more and more confident that God has spoken to us and directed us. I hear, more and more often, that people have a word from the Lord, some special revelation, a certainty of what the Lord wants. They tell me that they are called to some job or other, they tell me that they have authority to correct and they write long letters as a consequence, I hear that they have some word of inspiration that they must disclose.

And I remember Moses, God's friend who still had to go outside the camp, because God is only approached by the reverent. I remember that god is a consuming fire and that Moses could not see his faces, because no one will see God's face and live.

Christ comes close, in a moment, at his altar we will taste his life and live it. His word is set before, he calls us to follow. We know what we must do and what we must be. But even all that we have is

only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited

The hope of the Kingdom and the mystery of God's glory should be for us a daily reminder that we must not settle for less. We, the people who know that we do not know God are filled with longing for a greater justice, a better Kingdom, a deeper peace. We will not settle for less.

* We decided, just before lunch that there is a fourth – 'Go and make disciples of all nations'.

† C. S. Lewis *The Weight of Glory* (sermon, St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, June 8, 1942: published in *Theology*, November, 1941).