

Meeting With God

‘Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God’      ‘What sort of man is this?’

Both of today’s readings are about meeting with God, and what a strange thing that is. So before I come back to them, a diversion into a tangential, but not irrelevant, link to what your preacher has been reading lately. I am currently approaching the end of the second volume of Adam Mars-Jones’s *Pilcrow* series of novels. They present the imagined first-person narrative of John Cromer, born 1950, who is left severely disabled after a childhood illness. At the point I have reached he is at university, there is another volume published and probably more to come. The attraction, even brilliance of them as novels is partly in the language but also that whilst they present with great understanding the struggles of a wheelchair user of his generation, it is also the very clearly realised narrative of a young person, wrestling with the yearnings and doubts of self-discovery that we all pass through, and rightly indignant from time to time at being seen merely through his medical situation.

Part of his self-discovery is that Cromer discovers and adopts Hinduism as his faith, based on teenage library reading. He manages through considerable obstacles to take a six-week trip to an ashram in India in 1969 – putting him into a setting perhaps familiar to some of you from that era – somewhat indulgent Western engagement with aspects of eastern religion. But the connection for today is that he goes seeking an encounter with the divine, and is predictably somewhat disappointed. The closest he gets is when a cow nearly overturns his wheelchair, and he experiences almost all the feelings of dread, slowness of time, goosebumps and the rest – that he has read accompany experiences of the divine, and concludes cautiously that this was surely an emanation of Lakshmi sent to meet him. His spiritual mentor agrees firmly, but we are left to wonder, very reasonably, whether he just met what he expected to meet.

But this tendency can be as real for Christians too, at least sometimes. Many of you will know that my partner David is vicar of Hay-on-Wye in Wales, and his churches include the little church at Capel-y-Ffin in the heart of the Black Mountains. He is very fond of pointing out to anyone who will listen that near there, at the somewhat eccentric and short-lived 19<sup>th</sup>-century monastery established by Father Ignatius of Llanthony, occurred the only recorded apparition of the Virgin Mary in an Anglican context. Yet if one reads the actual history, what appears to have been seen several times, in a meadow by the monastery, was something like a bright light moving across the field and settling in a hedge. Even the contemporary accounts suggest the enthusiastic grasping, in a community with strong devotion to Mary, that it must be *her*.

During the summer I accompanied a statue of the Virgin Mary, modelled on images created for the Capel-y-Ffin devotion, down the river Wye as part of the varied efforts to raise awareness of the pollution of the river. When we met people, in other boats or on the bank, they often asked at first sight, ‘Is it Jesus?’ and we had to shout back, ‘No, it’s his *mother!*’ The statue is plain wood and not that easy to see details at a distance – but more significantly in the English context I think a generic religious figure is most likely at first sight to be assumed to be Jesus. Whereas across the historically Roman Catholic world, as many of you will know, it is at least as likely, perhaps more so, to be expected to be Mary.

Why does this matter? Well, we all know that our perceptions of the world are filtered, in every way, through both our senses and the interpretation which we put on them – we could not interact with a complex world if they were not. But when unusual things happen, weird and uncanny things that seem outside the norm, and so make us think ‘is something supernatural happening?’ (whatever exactly that means) we are just as likely to instinctively fit them into our inherited

frameworks. That tells us what, or *who*, is creating the strange sensation of light, or peace, or fear, or whatever it is. It is in the light of that somewhat challenging knowledge that we have to approach the scenes when the Bible presents us with an encounter with God. Maybe in past generations it was possible to do so with more simple faith, but to me it seems unreasonable to present a congregation with either of today's readings without exploring the question – why was it that those who wrote this down thought they were meeting God, and might they have been mistaken?

In the case of the Israelites at Sinai, that whole section of Exodus, on close analysis, shows much variety of language and imagery, enough to suggest to most scholars that it has been the subject of extensive editing around a central core. But as presented – a large group of refugees, hungry and frustrated after their wilderness journey, reach the mountain where they have expected to meet the God they fled the comforts of Egypt to find. And there is something seriously alarming happening there, and in that strange experience, the Jewish nation is somehow formed. For the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, where storms often arise and subside quickly, there was something uncanny about Jesus' actions which convinced them that *he* was the cause. And they then met two people with disturbing mental conditions, and again felt confident they were witnessing the supernatural.

What we have received is their experience as interpreted and written down, and we have no direct way to go behind that to certify or question their claims. In the world today we may or may not feel that we are surrounded by mystery and the supernatural, and I would not rush to assume that other ages and places were more or less sceptical than we may be. But we should note that even in Gospel times there was a crucial element of discernment taking place. Something strange and terrifying happened to the Israelites, and they knew it was God. Something strange and uncanny was around the two people coming from the tombs, and they knew they were possessed by evil. About Jesus people disagreed – opponents said of him that he had a demon, but in the wonders that they experienced, his disciples saw the reality of God. In other words, even in the strange and supernatural, *moral* judgment, about what was good or bad, wholesome and healing or sad and destructive, was possible, as it is now.

I have no idea, of course, what your experiences of God have been. Maybe very real, and very important to you – and I have heard of many from others over the years, especially in those called to ministry. Maybe, as for many faithful Christians, you're not sure if you've ever had something you'd call a direct experience of God, and instinctively feel a bit cautious of those who do. For myself, I have, mostly in my youth, and I am glad they guided me on the path of faith and ministry I have trod. But I am happy to accept now that the intensity and nearness I felt tell me much more about my own emotional state than very much about the God I have learnt to follow in the long-term rather than the dramatic moment. Perhaps rather like relationships – falling in love is all very exciting, but it is the patient endurance through marriage that is the real test of love.

And that is, I think, the conclusion I draw in relation to all the scenes from today's readings, and probably most of our encounters with God that take us outside the normal range of experience. We cannot tell just what happened at Sinai, but it forged a collective identity which has persisted for over 30 centuries in the Jewish people. We might not now characterise the state of the two people from Gadara as possession, but they met Jesus and were healed. And although we have faith in a much bigger God than simply an agency to stop the bad weather, in Jesus his disciples kept finding the signs that he revealed that God. May he be known to you now, however you experience him, and may you follow him in all your lives.