

Now may I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I once had a priest colleague in London called Steven. He joined the diocese a few years after me. He was a very wise-looking man, lots of gray hair, full of gravitas. He was also extremely quiet. He joined the Bishop's Council with me and for meeting after meeting, sat impassively. I imagined him to be listening earnestly to what was being said and I often wondered what he was thinking. He must, I thought, be forming some wise judgments about how we ran things.

After I made my wittering contributions, I used to look at him and think, oh if only I could be more like him, more taciturn and wise. After several months, I sensed halfway through a meeting that Steven was stirring. This was the moment I had been waiting for. He was at least going to share his thoughts with us. All those hours of listening would be condensed into a pithy saying that would go straight to the heart of the matter. At last, he opened his mouth and said, "Are there any other biscuits in the tin because these ones have got coconut in?"

At last, he spoke and my illusions were shattered. Gone forever were thoughts of Steven's wisdom and profundity. I say this because in our reading today, we hear Moses who is by now an old man, we hear him for the first time, speaking. Thankfully it's not nearly so disappointing, as he opens up into this life-changing dialog with God. Much has happened to Moses since we last heard of him.

If you were here last week, you'll know that last week we started a series. We'll be following the lectionary and concentrating on the story of Moses as it opens up in the book of Exodus. You'll remember if you were here last week how the baby Moses was put in a basket and at age three months, put on the River Nile, where he was discovered by a royal princess, which explains why he was brought up in the king's palace.

What he skipped over in chapter two before arriving at today's reading from chapter three, is the fact that Moses was a murderer. In chapter two, we realize that he killed an Egyptian and buried him in the sand, although that wasn't enough to cover up the crime. He was discovered and he fled. This is why we find him in our reading today in Midian, a long way from the land in which he grew up.

So much time has passed, which is why our reading begins with the words, "After a long time, the king of

Egypt died." Moses is no longer young when he has this meeting. Actually, I don't want to say too much more about Moses because I think this amazing encounter he has with God says a lot more about God and it's on him who I want to focus this morning and say three things that God does in this passage.

The first thing is God remembers. "God heard their groaning and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," it says. This theme of God remembering runs throughout the bible. The psalmist gives thanks and praise to the God who remembers. Psalm 98: "God has remembered his love and his faithfulness for the House of Israel." Psalm 136: "Give thanks to the one who remembered us in our low estate."

You might remember at the end of Luke's gospel. Do you remember Jesus is crucified between two criminals, one who ignores him and the other one says, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom." What a wonderful hope is expressed in that statement. I'd like to share that hope, that when I take my final breath, I'll put myself in the hands of a God who remembers me.

God in Isaiah says this, "Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." God's remembrance of us is contrasted in the bible with the forgetfulness of his people. The psalmist says, "Praise the Lord O my soul and forget not all his benefits." The prophets were sent to jog people's memory. Jeremiah lamented, "My people have forgotten." I think that we continue to forget. Forgetfulness is perhaps the great modern sin.

Do you know that in a recent survey, I googled this so it must be true, in a recent survey 89% of Americans said they believed in God. Are there 89% of Americans in church this morning? No. Is it because they don't believe in God anymore? No. It's because they've forgotten him. The funny thing is that they suddenly remember outside the operating theater or the exam room, but in the ordinary run of day to day life, we forget God.

If we look at the Old Testament, the prophets who came after Moses weren't trying to change the minds of the people. They weren't trying to get them to believe in something. They were jogging their memory. They were trying to make sure they remembered the God who remembered them. It's strange, when we're young, it seems so natural to be aware of God, to be mindful of

his presence with us, to see his hand all around us, but when we get old, it's not so much that we stop believing, but we forget.

Let's be grateful that God does not forget us. We see here that God remembered his people and took notice of them. Moving on, God remembers his people and he acted. He acted in a rather unusual way. God appeared to Moses in a bush that was blazing but not burning. Nothing like this happens anywhere else in the bible. It's a unique story. Why does God do it here? Well we don't really know. It doesn't say.

It simply seems to be a device to attract Moses' attention because, don't forget, Moses is out in the fields. He's minding his own business. He's tending his sheep. He's not a religious leader. He's on in years. Nothing particularly seems to have happened to him of note in most of his life after he had to flee. He's a long way from the action. He's not expecting to hear from God.

God has to do something to attract his attention. It worked. I think the story might prompt us to ask, what's the equivalent for us of a blazing bush? We know from the bible that God reaches out to us in many and various ways, but do we take notice? I met a woman recently who said she wasn't brought up in the church. Her parents weren't Christians. She knew nothing of the faith. I said, "Well how did you become to be a Christian?" She said, "God appeared to me in a dream."

I can honestly say that I don't think I've ever had God appear to me in a dream. I can, might say that God has spoken to me in many and various ways, but never through a burning bush, never through a dream, but this woman took notice and followed it up and came to believe. Moses didn't ignore the burning bush. That woman didn't ignore her dream. What are we in danger of missing? How did God appear to us yesterday? How might God appear to us today? Are we alert to God's attempt to attract our attention?

God remembers. God acts, albeit in a rather odd way in this story, but finally God reveals. At the heart of this story is the revelation of the divine name, Yahweh. God asks Moses, well it's revealed in the context, of God asking Moses to go back to Egypt and say to the Pharaoh, "I say old chap, would you mind awfully if the servants, your slaves, the people of Israel leave?" Well that's how he'd of said it if he was English, but he wasn't. But he couldn't find any words to say it in any language.

God seemed to think it was very straightforward. That he'd have a word with Moses, send Moses back to Egypt. Moses would say to the king, "We're off. Please let my people go." They'd all follow him and they'd walk out of the country. Well Moses saw that there were a few potential hiccups and pitfalls along the way. For instance, Moses thought well the Israelites might think it strange if after all the years I go back to them and say, "Here I am. Don't worry. I'm going to lead you out of the land of Egypt, of slavery. I'm just going to have a word with the king and then we're all going to go."

He was worried that they'd think he was a crank. Who is this guy, just showing up thinking he can lead us? They might legitimately ask, "Well who on earth are you? Who sent you?" Moses wanted to be able to say that he was on a bona fide divine mission. So he asks to the voice that's coming from this bush that's blazing but not burning, "Who are you? Who's speaking to me? Who shall I say sent me?"

The voice comes back with this enigmatic revelation, "I am who I am. Say to them, 'I am sent you to them.'" Theologians have argued for centuries about what that means, what the significance of this name is. I won't get into that, but I do want to point out that this picks up on something I was saying last week. If you were here last week, you'll remember that I said the Exodus was important for several reasons. One of them is that in it, in the book of Exodus, we see the identity of God being revealed and the identity of his people being formed. We see that theme continuing here as God reveals his name.

What Moses hears isn't just the name for God, but he also hears that the God who is so named is a God who is with him, who will accompany him on his mission. When Moses says to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" God says, "I will be with you." What Moses learns is that God wasn't choosing him because he had all the right skills. God was choosing him because he thought they'd work well together. "Who am I?" Moses asks. "You're a companion of mine," says God.

I once heard a story of a young boy in Africa who was going through a rite of initiation on the threshold of adulthood. He was about 13. He went out to a clearing in the jungle with his father and the men and they left him there, to be all on his own, in this clearing, overnight. He didn't get any sleep. He was petrified. He heard all the noises going on around him and wondered what terrifying beasts were prowling around nearby. When morning came, the light dawned. He looked around and he saw his father with a gun, hiding behind

a tree. He'd been there all night protecting him. The boy ran to him and said, "If I'd known you were there, I wouldn't have been so scared all night. I might have got some sleep."

But there's a lesson we need to learn in there. God promises, as he promised to Moses, to be with us. That promise he made to Moses, we can claim for ourselves, I will be with you. Now of course life can be scary. God might be out of sight. We might look around, hear the frightening noises and not see that God is with us. He might be out of sight, but the promise is that he is still close by. So God remembers. God acts. God reveals. Thanks be to God.

Amen.