



Sermon preached by Revd Dr David Cornick on 30th August 2026

Readings: Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12: 9-end; Matthew 16: 21-end

Pentecost 14

Moses was in the back end of beyond, what the splendid poetry of the King James Version calls ‘the backside of the desert’. He was as far from the power and reach of Pharaoh’s court as he could possibly be – deliberately so. A quick reminder of why – Moses was a murderer on the run. He’d been born at a moment when the enslaved Hebrew people were growing in number in Egypt. Pharaoh, looking over his shoulder fearfully as most tyrants do, decided that safety and security demanded that a whole generation of Hebrew newborn boys should be put to the sword. Well, you’ll remember the story from Sunday School days – how Moses’ mother hid him in the bullrushes, how he was found and adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter and brought up in the royal court. All went well until one day as a young man he saw an Egyptian beating the hell out of a Hebrew, and in righteous anger killed him. News got around, and Moses took to his heels, ending up in the back of beyond, otherwise known as Midian, eventually marries Zipporah, one of the seven daughters of the priest of Midian, living in the desert, minding his own business, or more precisely someone else’s business because he was shepherding his father-in-law Jethro’s sheep.

Wandering with his flock, he came to Mount Horeb, and ‘[t]here the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush’, and the bush burned but wasn’t consumed. This summer above all, we’d be as fascinated and astonished as Moses. We know anew what fire does, its rapacious, destructive, almost vindictive power as it sweeps across Dunwich Heath, the New Forest and Stourbridge. A bush that burns but isn’t consumed demands more than a second look. Moses looks, and God calls him name, and commands him to take off his sandals, for that very ordinary bit of the ‘backside of the desert’ is holy ground.

‘Holy ground’ – holy because of the abrupt explosion of the divine into Moses’s life, holy because here something primal, radically different, astonishingly beautiful and (as we shall see) profoundly demanding is encountered. The ordinary can contain the extraordinary. In her huge verse novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1856) Elizabeth Barrett Browning explores, amongst many other themes, the relationship between the physical world and its spiritual or inner life, which she saw as a poet and she wrote:

Earth’s crammed with Heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware.

By the grace of God, the most ordinary of things, places and times can be ‘afire with God’. Holy ground. One of Taylor Swift’s loveliest songs, written in 2012, is called ‘Holy Ground’. Looking back on a love affair which has ended, she remembers what was with gratitude and humility. As she remembers each facet of the affair, she sings the chorus:

It was good
Never looking down
And right where we stood
Was holy ground.

God doesn’t guard holy ground, but invites us to look around and take off our shoes, and give thanks – for human love, for deep insight, for the presence of God in so many guises. It’s no surprise that as the early church reflected on the story of the burning bush, they found there a type of the incarnation,

and of the Virgin Mary. One common image in Orthodox icons is a head and shoulders portrait of Mary, surrounded by the flames of the burning bush, with the figure of the grown Christ in a circle imposed on her. As Gregory of Nyssa put it in the fourth century, 'The light of divinity which through birth shone from her into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth.' The burning bush teaches us that the ordinary can contain the extraordinary, creation the Creator, and human history the purposes of God – the same theological truth that undergirds the very incarnation of Christ.

It was a pivotal moment in Israel's history therefore as Moses took off his sandals on holy ground, for God has heard the cries of his people in slavery, and this is where the process of redemption and healing begins. The bush burns and isn't consumed. History contains the story of God's presence, the rolling out of his deliverance, and it's going to begin in the brickfields of Egypt.

It is typical of Scripture, indeed of human life itself, that one of the most numinous, mystical moments in history, is immediately followed by farce. God has indeed heard the cries of his people. He knows their suffering and has come to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians to a land flowing with milk and honey. God has got it worked out, and God says to Moses, 'So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt'. From God's point of view it was a no brainer – Moses had the cv. Brought up in the Egyptian court. Knows the language, understands the power structures and the way things work. Yet a Hebrew of Hebrews, full of righteous anger at oppression – and he can handle himself – good on the streets.

But that was just what Moses didn't want to hear. He was trying to bury himself from his past in the backside of the desert. The last thing on earth he wanted was to go back to Egypt. A rough paraphrase would be 'What? Who? Me? You've got to be joking.' Well, says God, don't worry, I'll be at your side. Moses is unconvinced. Well, OK, if I go to the people of Israel and say to them 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you, and they ask me, What is his name? What shall I say to them? And, even more astonishing than the burning bush, God reveals his name to Moses – 'I am who I am...the Lord...the God of your ancestors.' Moses' reticence, fear, andchutzpah are met by the revelation of what the universe is about. 'I am who I am' – God, the source and goal of all that is, from whom being, life, consciousness, and all that is, from Mozart to melons and Einstein to black holes and white dwarves, derive and shall return. 'I am', *that* I am, will be with you Moses, in the history of redemption, on the journey from Egypt to the land flowing with milk and honey.

And there today's reading ends, depriving us of Moses' increasing desperate attempts to get God to give someone else the job, and God's increasing exasperation with and accommodation of Moses' supposed weaknesses. But what a theological feast we have had – holy ground, the revelation of who God is, and God's promise that redemption would be worked out in the history of Israel. No more brickfields. The ordinary holding the extraordinary. Creation containing the creator. If that began with the burning bush, it ended on a cross on a rubbish dump outside Jerusalem's walls. Michael Ramsey, child of Emmanuel Congregational Church, later Archbishop of Canterbury, once famously wrote, 'God is Christlike, and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all.' If you want to know who God is, look to Jesus.

The name that was revealed to Moses became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, and the most perfect picture of who God is was the crucifixion. According to Matthew, Jesus tried to explain that to the disciples in the days after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He told them haltingly of the days ahead – the vicious opposition from the powers that be, the immeasurable suffering, judicial murder, death, real death and then the third day. And just as at the burning bush, the depths of divine revelation summoned up human daftness. Peter, having realised who Jesus really was, couldn't bend his mind around this. He takes Jesus aside. Perhaps we should imagine him putting a comforting arm around the Lord's shoulders, 'Knock off the melancholy Lord, you've got it wrong. God forbid. That won't happen.' And he turns from rock to stumbling block in one swift sentence. 'Get behind me Satan... you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.' (Mt 16:22)

Well, as Peter discovered, there is a lot to learn about discipleship, and the path has many twists and unexpected turns. 'If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' Crosses. Everywhere – high above on the sanctuary wall, round my neck, doubtless round many of yours. Omnipresent, so successful has Christianity been. Julius Caesar fell into the hands of pirates in the 70s BC. They demanded a ransom of 20 talents – big money. Caesar told them he was worth much more than that and that they should demand more. They did, and while they waited, he lived with them for a month or so, treating them as slaves, practising his oratory on them and promising them that when he was released, he would have every last one crucified. And he did. The cross is the ugliest of symbols. It was about torture, humiliation, agony and oppressive power. It was what happened to those who got on the wrong side of history, who followed a different, divergent, deviant way. Those who wear crosses should expect opposition, for to wear a cross is to be part of Jesus' counter-cultural community.

It is the persistent, unrelenting love, the vulnerability of love, lived out as servanthood to the cross and beyond which the Devil and all his cohorts cannot defeat. And that way of living is what Paul spells out in his letter to the Romans – bless those who persecute you, rejoice with the rejoicing, weep with the weeping, don't repay evil, live peaceably, feed your enemies, give them drink. Overcome evil with good. In his commentary on *Romans* C.H.Dodd called it 'Love as the principle of social ethics'. Tell that to the manifesto writers and find out just how countercultural we are!

A bush that burned but wasn't consumed. A God who is known in what he does. Empty brickfields, freed slaves. A young peasant girl of courage giving birth in a stable. A cross on a far horizon, and a tomb with the stone rolled away, and a Lord who has gone before us into Galilee. That is our story. That is our song.

Take up your cross; let not its weight
Fill your weak soul with vain alarm:
His strength shall bear your spirit up,
And brace your heart, and nerve your arm.

Thanks be to God. Amen.