EXODUS

Talks given on a Pilgrimage to Sinai and Jordan
following in the Footsteps of Moses
Lent 2009

PETER SILLS

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A Bedouin tent in the Wadi Rum, Jordan

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Also by Peter Sills

The Time Has Come: *A Lenten journey with St Mark* (Columba Press: 2006)
Theonomics: Reconnecting economics with virtue & integrity (co-edited with Andrew Lightbown, Sacristy Press: 2014),
Ely Cathedral Souvenir Guide (Scala: 2008),

An occasional series of meditations and addresses:
My Strength and My Song (1991), *A Word in Season* (2001),
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IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MOSES

FOLLOWING as a pilgrim in the footsteps of Moses along the route of the Exodus is mostly to travel through modern Jordan. Jordan has been described as the ancient Holy Land, for within its borders were the ancient lands of the Ammonites, Edomites, Moabites and the other tribes, with whom Moses had to deal before entering and occupying the Promised Land.

A pilgrimage is a journey made at two levels; there is the outward, physical journey, and this takes you to some remarkable and beautiful places, like Mount Sinai, Petra and Wadi Rum; there is also the inward spiritual journey, and this too takes you to new places. In particular, following the Moses and the Israelites, as they walk from slavery to freedom, is to be drawn into their understanding of the God who led them on their journey, and thus were are invited to reflect on our own understanding of God and his ways.

These talks reflect on this theme. They are a revised and expanded version of the talks that I gave on a pilgrimage that I led in March 2009 to Sinai and Jordan. They follow the route of the pilgrimage which means that they do not always follow the sequence of events in the Biblical story as the Israelites wandered back and forth in the wilderness. The *Story so far* sections are designed to keep the reader on track.

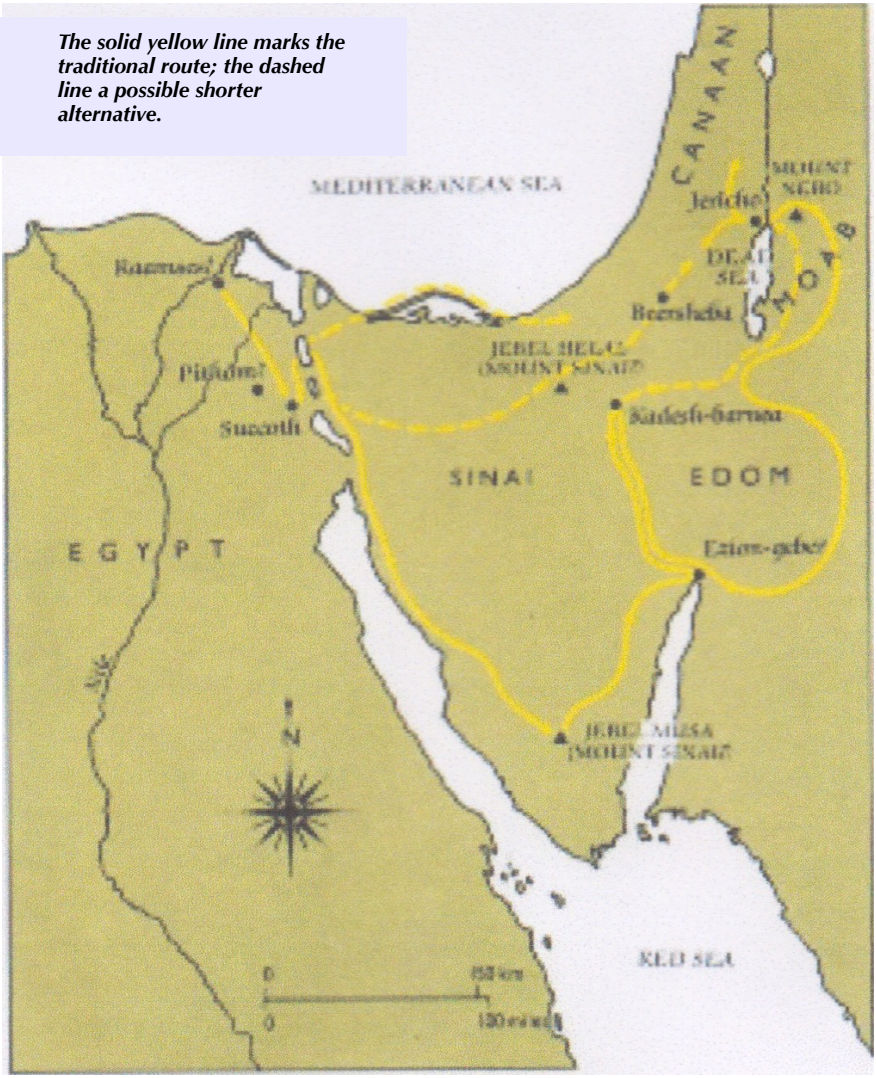
Peter Sills
September 2019

EXODUS: MYTH & MEANING

THE EXODUS is an event with huge symbolic meaning but with little, if any, history to support the biblical story. This is true not only of the route taken by the Israelites, but also of the events leading up to their flight, including the seven plagues visited upon the Egyptians. Apart from the Bible, there are no accounts of a large Hebrew settlement in Goshen, and there are difficulties in identifying the Pharaohs mentioned in the story. It may be a myth in the popular meaning of the word, but this does not mean that it is untrue. There is truth in the story, even if it is not historical truth, in the same way that there is truth in the Genesis stories both of the seven-day creation and of Adam and Eve even if they are not scientifically accurate. We do not read the Bible primarily as history or as science; we read it for what it says about God and humanity, and the way humans should live together if God's purposes are to be achieved. This is the truth contained in the stories of both creation and the Exodus; it is a theological truth; they are also myths in the more technical sense of explaining the goals and values by which we live.

The Route

THE ROUTE is described in Numbers 13, but it cannot be retraced precisely as many of the places listed cannot be identified. The Hebrew settlement was near Rameses, and their victory over Pharaoh was most likely in that area. This makes it improbable that the water crossing was actually through the Red Sea; it is more probable that the location was one of the inland lakes near the Nile delta. From there, it is thought, the Israelites travelled close to the coast, before turning inland to Mount Sinai. This was the location of the most significant encounters with God when the Laws of the Covenant were given to Moses. It was also where the people rebelled against God, inciting Aaron to make the golden calf.



From Mount Sinai they moved north to Kadesh Barnea, from where they sent out spies to explore the Land of Canaan. The spies reported that it was a fertile land, flowing with milk and honey, but it was well fortified and inhabited by giants! The Israelites decided not to invade, and as a

result spent 'forty years' in the desert. ('Forty years' is a Biblical term for a long time, and not to be taken literally). They retraced their steps to Etzion-geber (near modern Aqaba), and then moved as far north as Ajlun, before moving back south to Mount Nebo, from where Joshua led the eventual invasion of Canaan.

Did it happen?

THE CONSENSUS seems to be that something happened, but not as described in the Bible. For example, the Bible gives the number of people who escaped from Egypt as 603,550 *(Numbers 1.46)*; this must be a gross over-estimate, as the desert could not have supported so many people; modern estimates vary from 5000 to 140,000. More seriously, there is no archeological evidence to support the story. On the other hand, the story is unlikely to be pure fiction; something happened, sufficiently powerful to give rise to the myth of the origin of Israel, though at this remote point in time it is impossible to say what. If it was a large-scale migration, then we have a modern image in the columns of refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria, and in the Rohinga fleeing persecution in Myanmar. However, unlike these modern exodii, the Israelites were accompanied by their flocks and other animals, and carts containing their clothes, belongings and tents, which I imagine were similar to those used by the Bedouin today (as pictured on the front cover).

Travelling in the footsteps of Moses, it is important to remember that, as with the accounts of creation, the Bible narrative is not primarily about history or science, but God. This story is best understood not as history, but as the founding myth of Israel. It has in common with similar events down the ages the search for freedom, and it is not surprising that other enslaved peoples, like the American slaves, have taken courage from it. It also reflects something basic in the human search for authenticity (if that is the right word): we discover who we are through struggle and conflict; initiation rituals require the initiates to prove themselves though overcoming arduous challenges in which they have to resist the forces of evil,

and something similar generally characterises the stories of the founding of the nations. The Exodus is the story in which Israel finds her *raison d'être,* and it is remembered each week in the Seder, the family meal that marks the beginning of the Sabbath, and it is commemorated each year at Passover. In this story, whatever happened, the hand of God is to be discerned, and his character, laws and purposes revealed, and it is to understand these things better that the pilgrim follows in the footsteps of Moses. The object of the pilgrimage is not so much to trace an historical journey, as to make a spiritual journey seeking the God who will not let us rest, but continues to call us to build his promised land.

The God who willed it

READING this story and making this journey, what do we learn about God – or rather, what do we learn about our human perceptions of God? This is the basic theme of these reflections.

When I first read the Exodus story I did so as the account of the heroic conquest of Canaan in fulfilment of the promise of God, who, it was believed, had given the land to his chosen people. Some time later on a visit to the Holy Land it occurred to me that the Biblical story gives no thought to the fate of the Canaanites, the people whose homeland it was. They suffered cruelly, and thereafter in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, we read of continual conflict between them and Israel. They did not disappear from the land, and they are still there. Today they are known as Palestinians, and it is arguable that the seeds of the present conflict between them and Israel were sown in the Exodus, many millennia ago.

It is hard not to identify with the desire for freedom of an oppressed people. The story, as told in the Bible, is of a people, then known as Hebrews, seeking relief from famine, being welcomed to Egypt by her rulers; in time they became too numerous; the Egyptians turned against them and enslaved them. They suffered harshly. Sent by God, Moses

confronted Pharaoh with their righteous demand for freedom. At first their demand was refused; eventually, after a series of appalling plagues visited upon Egypt by God, Pharaoh relented, and the Israelites began their long walk to freedom. What the biblical story does not mention, and what a sympathetic identification with the plight of Israel obscures, is that their freedom was only achieved by subjecting another people to violence and oppression. Looked at in this way, the story is far from heroic – that is, if heroism includes morality. And for Christians – indeed for anyone with a moral concern – the question arises: What kind of God ordains and enables this kind of action, both the plagues and the occupation of Canaan? Hardly the God of love whom Jesus revealed.

On the other hand, the story witnesses to the kind of society that God wills for his human creation. This is revealed in the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai: central to human society is the principle of *shalom*, usually translated as 'peace', but much richer and challenging than our rather attenuated understanding. *Shalom* does not connote simply the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice. God wills a righteous society in which all feel that they belong and have a part to play, and in which the needs of all are cared for, the rich accepting a duty of generosity towards the poor. This conception of society, based on the principles of divine law, rather than on the will and whims of the king, was hugely in advance of other Middle Eastern nations. Here God is righteous, moral and merciful. Although some of the rules strike us today as harsh, an eye for an eye, for example, or wrong, like the toleration of slavery, the society that God ordains is, nevertheless, one where the poor and the dispossessed are held in special concern, seen particularly in the rules for the freeing of slaves which enjoin the owner to lavish upon the freed slave the best of his goods, because he has had his labour for free. The Exodus thus presents us with another face of God, much more resonant with the God of love who sent us his Son to teach us the way of peace.

At one and the same time, therefore, the Exodus confronts with both a primitive and a sophisticated understanding of God. These two elements are in tension as the Biblical story unfolds, first picturing God as a tribal champion, more powerful than ethical; later, through the insights of Micah, Hosea, Isaiah and the other prophets, the picture changes, and God's ethical and righteous character becomes the dominant image. From a Christian perspective, the high point of the Old Testament understanding comes with a later prophet whose name is unknown, but who is referred to as Second Isaiah (because he wrote the second part of the Book of Isaiah, chapters 40 – 55). He saw God as one who suffers for his people, taking the burden of their sins upon himself, a picture far removed from the wrathful God of the Exodus. This, of course, is the God whom we see in human form in Jesus. If, as we believe, this is the true picture of God, then, while it is possible to attribute to God the will for people to be free, it is impossible to attribute to God the methods by which that freedom was achieved in the Exodus – nor indeed the continued use of those methods today in the progressive annexation of Palestinian land. If this is true, then the divine justification for the occupation of Canaan traditionally advanced cannot be maintained. This does not nullify the legitimacy of the desire of the Jewish people for a homeland, but it does change the basis on which that desire can be legitimately pursued. In offering these reflections as we follow in the footsteps of Moses, I have tried not to lose sight of this wider context.

From Moses to Jesus

THE JEWISH faith is rooted in the Exodus, a divine act of deliverance, bringing to an end the years of slavery, and in the years that followed transforming them from a rabble of slaves into a People, with a deep sense of a shared identity and destiny. In the wilderness also, the Israelites received the ceremonies through which they expressed their devotion to God, chief among them the Passover, the annual commemoration of the Exodus. The agent of both their deliverance and their

transformation was Moses, the son of a Hebrew, but raised as an Egyptian prince.

Because the Christian faith has Jewish roots, it is an important event for Christians also. Moses promised that God would raise up another prophet like himself, a prophecy that Christians believe was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Like Moses, Jesus was the agent of a divine act of liberation: another release from slavery, this time from the slavery of sin to the freedom of the children of God. Like Moses, he formed a People, of whom the twelve apostles, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, were the forerunners. Christian worship has its roots in the Exodus: baptism recalls the deliverance through the waters of the Red Sea, and the Eucharist recalls the Passover. But for the new people of God, there was no call to violent conquest; instead Jesus offered his own life for the peace of the world. As St John wrote, 'The law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.' *(John 1.17)*

GOSHEN

THE RED SEA

DELIVERANCE

Story so far:

Many centuries have passed since the tribe of Jacob, during a time of widespread famine, took refuge in Egypt. At the invitation of Pharaoh they settled in Goshen, a fertile land in the Nile delta. There they prospered and increased in numbers, and became known as Israelites. In time, a new dynasty ascended the throne of Egypt that turned against the Israelites and enslaved them. After many years of servitude, Moses was called by God to go to Pharaoh with the demand that he 'Let the people go!' so that they could worship God. Pharaoh refused, and seven plagues were visited upon Egypt, the final one being the killing of the first-born of both man and beast – the Israelites marked their houses so that they were passed over by the angels of death. In the face of this appalling slaughter Pharaoh relented; the Israelites were allowed to leave, and they plundered the Egyptians as they did so. God commanded Moses to institute the Passover, a special meal to be 'eaten in urgent haste', as a memorial of their deliverance. And so they set out. Almost immediately, Pharaoh changed his mind; his army set off in pursuit, only to be trapped in the mud of the Red Sea.

Reading

Exodus 14.15–31 God commands Moses to stretch out his staff over the waters to divide them; the Israelites pass through them on dry land; the Egyptians set off in pursuit; the waters close over them, and they are drowned.

A GLANCE at the map is enough to raise doubts that the Red Sea, as we know it today, was the place where the waters parted allowing the Israelites to make good their escape, closing again to trap the army of Pharaoh. It is clear from the Biblical story that the Egyptian pursuit followed soon after the escape and there simply would not have been enough time for the Israelites to have reached the Red Sea, even if we assume it was the north-western fork (the Gulf of Sinai) that they crossed – indeed, why would they have made such a detour when the most direct route south was over dry land? Some scholars have suggested that the most likely location was a 'reed' sea, an inland lake on the edge of Goshen, which seems much more probable. Wherever it took place, and whatever actually happened, there was a dramatic escape of a great host of people, and it has ever since been celebrated as God's mighty act of deliverance. It has also inspired other enslaved peoples, notably the American slaves, and given them reason to look to God in hope. The question is to what God are they looking?

If a pilgrimage is a walk with God, then we pilgrims cannot avoid the question: With what God do we want to walk – the god of our national or personal interests, or the God who sets all people free? This a question that will accompany us on our journey, and we begin to reflect on it by noting the elements in the Exodus story that resonate with our own times.

Looked at through modern eyes the story begins with an immigrant people, and we need no reminding that immigration is a divisive issue, bringing all kinds of social tensions in its train. The tribe of Jacob, known then as Hebrews, were initially welcomed by Pharaoh, who had good cause to be grateful because his chief minister, Joseph – the master-mind behind Egypt's preparations to survive the famine – was one of Jacob's

sons. Today, we might praise Pharaoh for his generous response to a humanitarian disaster – a notable example of the rich coming to the aid of the poor – but this act of mercy had unintended and unforeseen consequences. The Hebrews became too numerous and too successful; the Egyptians turned against them; a new regime of different political colour gained power and introduced repressive measures directed against the Hebrews, culminating in their enslavement. It is a story that has been repeated time and again across the world, most appallingly in Nazi Germany, and there are disturbing echoes in the populist rhetoric of our own times, not least in the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers by many European nations. Like the ancient Egyptians, we may want to reach out to those in need, but we fail to realise that our welcome will have long-term implications for the nature of our society, which, when they become apparent, we reject, even though the nature of our society was an important element in creating the oppressive conditions from which the immigrants fled in the first place. Like the ancient Egyptians, only too often we reach out to the oppressed and in the end turn against them.

The Exodus story has other contemporary resonances: powerful rulers more concerned with economics than with justice, and the tension between popular pressure and moral action. Where is God in all this? The Exodus is remembered as showing clearly that God is on the side of the oppressed. It was by God's power that Pharaoh was overcome, and the Israelites delivered from oppression to freedom in the promised land. One of the oddities of this understanding is that it took God a long time – several centuries – to respond to his people's plight; but far more disturbing is the divine resort to violence to achieve his aim. The seven plagues visited upon Egypt must have caused huge suffering to the ordinary people, and the final plague, the slaughter of the first-born, is simply appalling in its cruelty. But this is not all; the way God is described as acting is capricious: he smites the Egyptians with the plagues and at the same time hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he

continues to reject Moses' demand, thus justifying God in visiting even worse disasters upon him and his people. Can we really believe that this is the way that God acts? A god who acts in this way is a monster, to be rejected rather than worshipped.

If we hold the picture of God seen in the Exodus story alongside the picture of God that we see in Jesus of Nazareth, the contrast is only too apparent. The God who is worthy of worship is the one whom Jesus memorably described as having counted all the hairs on our head, so great is his love for us. This is the God to whom the oppressed peoples of the world look to to deliver them, not some tribal champion who defeats their enemies by overwhelming force. And what is the deliverance that he offers? The same as the Israelites demanded of Pharaoh: the chance to become the people that God in his love destined them to be.

SINAI

FIRAN

COVENANT

Story so far:

The Israelites made good their escape, and having journeyed down the west side of the Sinai peninsula they arrived at Elim (Firan).

Readings

Exodus 15.23–27 For three days the Israelites cannot find water, and at Marah it is bitter. God sweetens the water and the people drink. God commands the people to obey his laws; if they do he will save them.

Deuteronomy 7.6–11 The Lord calls you because he loves you – God is faithful, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations.

Mark 10.32–34; 14.12–26 Jesus predicts his passion / He celebrates The Last Supper

READ on its own the reading from Deuteronomy suggests the loving God with which we are familiar, but it is preceded by the command to drive out the nations: destroy them totally, show them no mercy, break up their holy places, and do not intermarry with them. The disturbing picture of God demanding violent conquest and destruction is still there; put together with the following passage we have a particular picture of divine love, a love that is possessive, or 'jealous' to use the biblical term.

God is jealous in the sense that his concern is solely for Israel, they are his people, his treasured possession, to whom he has bound himself to them by a Covenant.

Covenant is basic to the religion of both Jews and Christians. A covenant is a solemn bond, an open-ended commitment, that binds together people or nations. The Covenant with Israel binds God to his People, and his People to him. Several times in the OT we read the covenant formula: 'I will be your God, and you will be my people.' The Covenant was first made though Noah, renewed through Abraham, and again through Moses; the terms of the covenant are set out in first five books of Bible, the books of the Law.

A covenant is like a family bond; marriage is a covenant relationship. A covenant is sealed in a ceremonial way, e.g. by the exchange of gifts, a special meal, offering sacrifice, or joining hands. These symbolic signs signify both peace and lasting intent. The covenant with God was sealed by sacrifice, by the blood of the Passover lambs.

Israel found it hard to keep the terms of the covenant, and time and again rebelled, beginning on their long walk to freedom, as we shall hear. God punishes them for their disobedience, but he remains true to his covenant and does not forsake them; and in time, as a further sign of his love and mercy he offers them a new relationship, a new covenant. This was made though Jesus. At the last supper, when he blessed the cup of wine, Jesus said it was his blood of the new covenant, poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins. The new covenant was sealed by his sacrifice on the Cross. We, and all the baptised stand within this new covenant.

Family bonds are with those we have been given, not with those whom we have chosen, and part of the purpose of making a journey together is to learn to appreciate those whom we might not have chosen, but whom God has given to us. It is all part of realising that despite our failings, God has bound himself to us as he did to the Israelites, and he will not let

us go. He says to each of us, as he said to those who followed him through this desert: 'I am your God, and you are my People.' He cares for us and delights over us, rejoicing in our joys and sharing our sorrows.

In this Lenten journey together, we'll reflect on what it means to be within the new covenant, and on how our understanding of the God who draws us into this covenant relationship has changed from one who demands murder and racial purity to one who offers his life for our salvation.

MOUNT SINAI – 1

THE LAW GIVEN TO MOSES

Story so far:

From Firan the Israelites travelled to Mount Sinai, arriving three months after they left Egypt. Here they had a special encounter with God.

Readings

Exodus 19.1–11; 19.20 – 20.20 Moses ascends Mount Sinai. God commands him to say to the people that they themselves saw what he did to the Egyptians, and how He rescued his people. If they obey Him and keep His covenant they of all nations will be His treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Moses commands the people to gather before the Lord.

Three days after arriving there are portents rend the air: thunder, lightning and thick clouds. Moses goes up the mountain and God speaks the Ten Commandments, and then the rest of the Law is given (chs 21 – 31).

Matthew 5.17, 21–30, 43–48 Jesus gives the New Law

THE COVENANT made at Sinai was the fullest expression of the OT covenant, accompanied as it was by the statement of the Law that governed it. We heard read the Ten Commandments; in the eleven chapters that follow (chs. 21 – 31) further laws are given covering all aspects of life, sacred and secular. And yet more rules are contained in Leviticus and Numbers, in all, well over 700 commandments!

The laws of the OT represent a radical departure from the norms of the time, and of the surrounding nations. In those days it wasn't at all taken for granted that killing, theft and adultery were wrong; religion was generally related to a fertility cult, and involved sexual practices believed to keep the gods productive!

The laws of Moses were a great leap forward in the conception of man's relationship to man and to God. The sabbath observance, for example – a vital safeguard for the health of the working population – dates back over 3000 years to what happened here, and it is only the godless generation of our day that has begun to ignore it. The ethics of the Law are notable: an absolute value is placed on human life; community interest takes precedence over individual interest; people matter more than property; and the poor are God's special concern: time and again Israel is required to show consideration to the less fortunate – orphans, widows and aliens – because this is how God had treated them.

The rest of the 700-plus commandments cover all aspects of life: agriculture, trade, crime, family matters, personal injury, finance and worship. There is no orderly presentation; the rules are jumbled up, and no distinction is made between sacred and secular: all of life is part of our offering of ourselves to God; what is done in the market place is equally part of worship as what is done in the holy place.

Israelite religion was a religion of law, and it became rule-bound, as is evident from Jesus' running dispute with the Pharisees. But he doesn't

reject the law, instead he emphasises its inner intent, placing the spirit of the law above the letter of the law: it is not enough to have the law in our heads; it must also be in our hearts. And he takes the inner logic of the Mosaic law to its conclusion: love your enemies. There is nothing like this in any other religion. Here is a new element in the picture of God, and in direct contradiction of the way enemies are to be treated in the Exodus.

MOUNT SINAI – 2

THE GOLDEN CALF

Story so far:
At Sinai God summoned Moses up the mountain where he spoke to him, instructing him to remind the people that if they kept his covenant then, out of all peoples, they would become his special possession: 'You will be to me a kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' (Exodus 19.5–6) It is the first in a series of meetings that Moses had with God during which the Law was given to him (Exodus chs 20 – 31). First among those laws are the Ten Commandments which, it is said, God wrote on tablets of stone.

Reading

Exodus 32.1–12, 14–15a, 19–20, 30–35 Moses is a long time up the mountain receiving all the laws, and the people feel abandoned. They persuade Aaron to make for them a god whom they can worship; he makes a golden calf. When God sends Moses down to the people and sees the calf, he throws down the tablets in anger and breaks them. God punishes the people with a plague.

THE STORY of Israel is the story of a people led on by God against whom they constantly rebelled, but who would not let them go. This scenario began in the Exodus, and continued throughout the OT period. The Israelites left Egypt believing that they would soon occupy a new homeland. The journey actually took many years (the biblical expression 'forty years' simply means a long time, like the expression 'a month of Sundays'), and by the end of it most of those who set out with Moses had died; it was their children who entered the promised land. According to the Bible, it was because of the people's disobedience that journey took so long; as the psalmist put it, God vowed in his anger: 'They shall never enter my rest.' *(Psalm 95.11)*.

The most significant sign of their rebellion was the making of the golden calf. Feeling abandoned, so long had Moses been up the mountain, the people came to Aaron, demanding, 'Come, make us gods to go before us.' The story of the golden calf resonates in this and every age. The bible teaches that because we are made in the image and likeness of God we cannot live without God, and if we can't find him then we turn to gods of our own making. The story confronts us with the question: What gods do we worship – those of our own making, or the God revealed to Moses? Another way of putting the question is to ask: What is central in our lives? What is our source of purpose and value? The golden calf is still in our midst and takes many forms: the list is familiar enough: power, wealth and status, seen today not just in the familiar public faces, but also in the personal desires for material prosperity, prowess in sport, professional prestige, an attractive appearance and physique, and 'likes' on social media.

The story attests that God himself inscribed the tablets that Moses carried down the mountain. We write on stone when the writing is meant to endure; the laws that God wrote were meant to last; the ten commandments are God's enduring laws, reflecting his eternal values and shaping our worship. The first is the most fundamental: 'You must have no other god beside me.' *(Exodus 20.3)* The next two commandments reinforce this,

prohibiting taking the name of God in vain, and requiring the sabbath to be kept holy. The remaining seven set out the basic moral principles for communal life, requiring respect for the life and property of others, and for foundational social relationships. They are incompatible with the 'me first' approach to life that characterises the gods that go before us today. You can only live fully according to the precepts of these seven commandments if you have taken the first three to heart.

Taking things to heart implies a voluntary commitment, an act of the will; it is not something that can be done under compulsion; nor can it be done without effort. Turning away from our false gods takes time and energy. Saints, like St Benedict, spoke of growth in virtue through following a spiritual path designed to dethrone our false gods and enthrone God alone in our lives. As the psalmist said, 'For God alone my soul in silence waits; in him is my hope.' *(Psalm 62.5)* Virtue is often defined simply as moral excellence. It is a moral quality, but I think it's more than that; virtue has a dynamic quality; it is a gift of God that empowers us to take to heart his values and live a life that brings us to him. Virtue is like the living water that Jesus promised to those who put their trust in him *(John 4.14)*.

Often, like the Israelites waiting for Moses, we feel more the absence of God than his presence. It is at times like these that we need to draw on our spiritual reserves, and it is building up these reserves that the path of virtue enables, keeping us focussed on God, and not on the golden calves of our our making.

MIDIAN

ST CATHERINE'S – 1

MOSES FLEES FROM PHARAOH

Story so far:

We step back in time to when Moses was still living at the Egyptian court. One day he goes out to see his people at work; he sees their hard labour and the cruelty of their taskmasters. It was a turning point in his life.

Reading

Exodus 2.11–25 Moses sees one of the taskmasters beating a Hebrew; in anger Moses killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. His deed became known to Pharaoh who sought to kill Moses; hearing of this he fled for his life to Midian. One day he helped the daughters of Reuel to water their flock; he was welcomed into Reuel's family who gave him his daughter Zipporah in marriage. She bore him a son whom Moses named Gershom, saying, "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land.". *[Ger is the Hebrew for alien.]*

THOSE whom God calls are not perfect, but their hearts are in the right place; they are open to God, willing to be used in his service. Four examples: Moses, David, Peter and Paul.

Moses – murdered an Egyptian. From prince to shepherd to deliverer.

David – the youngest son of Jesse, not high born: became a man of war; killed Goliath; seduced Bathsheba, and then brought about her husband's death so that he could have her for himself. From shepherd to king.

Peter – impetuous, often wrong, denied Jesus, repentant, martyr. From fisherman to leader of the apostles.

Paul – approved of the stoning of Stephen, minding the clothes of those who did it. He actively persecuted Christians, but became the most dedicated and tireless missionary. From pharisee to apostle.

God called them because of their gifts that he will use in his service. God sees beyond our actions, which so often fall short of his standards, to our potential. Like Jesus calling Nathaniel: without ever having spoken to Nathaniel – he had just seen him under a fig tree – Jesus knew that his spirit was true. St John said that Jesus could see what was in a man *(John 1.48–50)*. It was the same when he called Peter and Paul, and when God called Moses and David. All four were called because their hearts were in the right place, and they had the character and gifts to do what God required.

Throughout the Exodus Moses' qualities of leadership were put to the test time and again, and at each time of testing he turned to God, seeking guidance and direction. Jesus also regularly spent time alone in prayer to God. Times of testing are also times of growth. Leadership is not just a matter of having the right skills and a winning personality, it is also about pursuing the right aims and having the right moral vision, qualities that come with maturity. Just as we have to hone our skills, so we also have to move beyond relying on our personality to acquiring true depth of character, growing in virtue and moral vision. We can't do this in our own strength; it is the work of God's Spirit within us.

The saints, like Jesus himself, are there as the great examples, not as the great exceptions. Like them, we are called to use our gifts in his service. I

think it was Theresa of Avila who said that God does not require a perfect work, but an infinite desire. If God can perfect the failings of Moses, David, Peter and Paul, then he can also perfect us, and warm our desire.

ST CATHERINE'S – 2

GOD CALLS MOSES

Story so far:

Moses lived with his father-in-law for many years (his name in the Biblical account changes from Reuel to Jethro), and became a shepherd. One day, in the desert tending his flocks near Mount Horeb, the mountain of God (also known as Mount Sinai), he sees a bush that appears to be on fire, and yet the bush is not burnt or consumed by the fire. He goes to take a closer look …

Readings

Exodus 3.1–12 Moses Moses hears God calling to him from the bush; God commands; God commands him to take off his sandals because he is standing on holy ground. God says to Moses that he has seen the misery of his people and he will rescue them and bring them into a good and spacious land, 'flowing with milk and honey,' the home of the Canaanites and other peoples. Moses is to go to Pharaoh to ask him to let the people go. Moses is daunted at the task, but God assures him that He will be with him, and theat once the people have left they will worship Him on Mount Sinai.

2 Corinthians 4.1–12 Paul describes the calling of an apostle – 'we have this treasure in jars of clay – hard pressed but not crushed...etc. – We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus...'

STORIES of journeys are basic to both Jewish and Christian religion; all the main people were on the move: Noah, Abraham, Joseph and Jacob; Moses, Elijah, Amos, and Isaiah; John the Baptist, Joseph and Mary, Jesus, and Paul.

We have these stories because our understanding is that religion is not about keeping things the same, as in the fertility cults, but about moving closer to God, more deeply into his love. God is personal; he invites us to make a relationship with him, and, as with our human relationships, this requires us to move. To get to know someone is to change; to grow, physically and spiritually, is to change; and to be become mature is to have changed often. Human life is about moving on, making a journey. In the same way, faith is best seen as a journey, not simply as a set of beliefs.

The great journeys of the Jewish and Christian faiths all begin with the call of God. And he doesn't usually provide a map! A journey of faith, like this pilgrimage, is a two-fold journey, both physical and spiritual. For Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Paul the effectiveness of their outward journey depended on their inner journey into the depths of their being, and this is the most important journey that we humans make. We may not all be called to make an outward journey, but we are all called to make the journey within.

Moses had to make this journey if he was to be God's instrument in freeing the Israelites from slavery. Although he had been brought up in the royal household, he hadn't lost touch with his people, and when he saw one being maltreated, he went to his aid, killing his persecutor. Then he fled for his life. He was on the way to becoming a liberator, but he had to grow into what that required: general, law-giver, judge, spiritual leader. Moses did that not only in the years before he confronted Pharaoh, but also on the long walk that followed; for example, the time when his

father-in-law, Jethro, advised him to delegate some of his tasks *(Exodus 18.1–27)*. David, too, had to grow into what it meant to be a king, especially after he was rebuked by Nathan for seducing Bathsheba.

In the same way Jesus grew into his calling during the time he spent in the Judean wilderness, working out what it meant to be the Son of God; and St Paul, after his conversion, spent three years in Arabia learning from his experience. Literally or metaphorically, they all experienced the silence and space of the desert.

The desert has long been experienced as the place of encounter with God, as it was for Moses who heard God speaking to him from the burning bush. Here is a place apart from the world, where we can hear the voice of God more clearly – and because of that, the desert is also a place of testing. The emptiness resonates with an inner emptiness, a poverty of the spirit, that seems widespread today. We may be always on the move but we're not making a journey. God never ceases from calling; he calls us, and this pilgrimage is, perhaps, part of our response, a journey of faith, in which we ask God to fill our emptiness. God longs to warm our hearts with the fire of his spirit, a flame, like the fire of Sinai, that burns but never consumes. St Augustine taught us how to pray:

'O thou that burneth but never consumest, O my God, kindle me.'

Perhaps like St Paul we feel that we are earthen vessels to hold the treasure that God longs to give us, but then also like him we can be assured, that whatever befalls us, God will not let us go, and no matter where we are, God calls us to move. As T S Eliot put it:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time. *(Little Gidding)*

The inner journey is life-long; God is always ahead, as he was in the Exodus, and our true security, as the Israelites had to learn, is not so much about arriving, as about knowing that we're on the right path.

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WILDERNESS

WADI RUM

THE WATERS OF MERIBAH

Story so far:

We return to the journey, to an episode before the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai.

After their stay at Elim (Firan) the Israelites moved on to the desert of Sin between Elim and Sinai. The people complained that they had no bread; they had been better off by 'the fleshpots' of Egypt where bread was plentiful. Moses appealed to God who promised to rain down bread from heaven, and the manna appeared. The people were not satisfied; they also wanted meat, and so God sent a flock of quails. They moved on to Rephidim, but there was no water …

Readings

Exodus 17.1–7 Moses strikes water from the rock. He names the place Massah, ('testing') and Meribah ('quarelling') because there the Israelites quarelled and tested the Lord saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Psalm 95 'Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah and Massah…'

John 7.37–39 At the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus, speaking of the Spirit, says, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.'

WATER is a problem in a place like this, and it's not surprising that lack of it was a cause of contention for Moses. It is still a problem in the politics of the region: whoever controls the water resources has the upper hand, and Israel's control of the upper Jordan and the Golan heights, puts her in a commanding position. The flow in the river is much reduced, and Jordanian farmers complain that they don't get a fair share. The Dead Sea is now at the lowest ever levels – a marker on the cliffs on the Israeli side shows the level in the 1920s – a good two metres above the road, and the road is several metres above the present sea level.

Water is vital to life, and on their long march the people turned against Moses. 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt to make us die of thirst?' they cried. God's response was to bring water out of the rock. (This is not so astonishing as it sounds: in Sinai some rock is porous and gives water when struck.) But God was not pleased with this lack of trust in him, and Massah and Meribah pass into the history of Israel as a place of testing and quarrelling. Here is the Biblical reason for the forty years wandering: because they put God to the test he swore that none of them would enter his rest, *i.e.* they would not reach the promised land, and they did not.

This response may strike us as unfair, to say the least, and hardly consistent with the God of love that Jesus proclaimed. And it raises the question: What does it mean to put our trust in God? Is it that we expect that he will provide all the material things we need, like water, or does it mean something else? And if we don't trust him, can we expect to be punished?

The answer depends on the picture of God that we have. Seeing him as a loving father, as Jesus did, I would say that trusting in God means taking him as my guide. This means, in turn, trying to let his values become my values, his outlook my outlook, and so on. It means seeking to build a relationship with him through prayer, and learning to nurture within myself the spiritual gifts that he gives. What I do not expect, is that nothing will go wrong – there won't always be water on tap just when I want it, so to speak. There may be times when I feel more his

absence than his presence, as even Jesus did on the Cross, but deep down I know that, earthen vessel that I am, I am loved and used, and that he won't let me go.

The sign that God is trustworthy is, of course, Jesus himself, and the water I need for the inner journey is the gift of his spirit, as he said at the Festival: 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him'. *(John 7.37–38)*

We need water to live, but we also need living water, the gift of God's spirit. It is this that feeds our inner life, and it is our inner life that shapes our outer life in the world. The problems we face today, both personally and globally, are about what comes from within us. Whether it is anti-social behaviour, celebs misbehaving, drugs or booze, or climate change, the banking crisis, or the use of water resources in this part of the Middle East, the real problem is within.

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PETRA – I

THE CLOUD

Story so far:

As they journeyed through the wilderness the Israelites set up in the centre of the camp the Tent of Testimony in which they placed the tabernacle. It was in this tent that Moses went to speak to God. A cloud covered the tent, and when they struck camp and moved on, so the cloud moved with them.

Readings

Numbers 9.15–23; 10.11–12 A cloud covers the Tent of the Testimony, and when it lifts they move, when it rests they remain. On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, they set out from Sinai to Paran.

Isaiah 7.10–14 The prophet says Ahaz should ask for a sign, but he refuses: 'I will not put the Lord to the test'. Even so, God gave him a sign: 'The young woman is with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel.'

Luke 1.26–38 The angel Gabriel is sent to Mary; she responds to his message: 'I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said.'

For the Feast of the Annunciation

THE CLOUD that went before the Israelites was a symbol of God's presence. We come across it in many biblical stories, e.g., the voice from cloud at Mount Sinai, and the voice which spoke to Jesus at his baptism and at his transfiguration. The cloud was there, unmentioned, overshadowing Mary at her annunciation, in the same way that the Spirit overshadowed the waters at creation. And when the priest stretches out his hands over the bread and wine at the Eucharist, the symbolism is of the same overshadowing by the Holy Spirit.

The Cloud is the sign that God is with his people. In the Exodus it goes before them as they move, and when they camp it settles over the Tent of

Testimony. When God wishes to speak to Moses he is summoned up into the cloud, thus entering into the presence of God. Notably, this is a privilege given to few, a singular sign of God's favour. (One of the characteristics of God in all three Abrahamic faiths, is the way he reveals himself through particular people like Moses, and through particular events like the Exodus.)

God is the one who calls, and down the ages and across the world he has called particular people to be his messengers and agents, and to understand God it helps to get to know those whom he calls. Today we celebrate his call to Mary, the mother of Jesus. One of the sadnesses of the Church is the division among Christians in their attitude to Mary; it is sad particularly because she of all the saints can help us to know what it means to be called – and we're all called because we've all been baptised. To say 'Yes' to God, as Mary did, is to heed his call.

What does Mary teach us? She teaches us that to be called is not to have a special understanding. The angel told her that her child would be special, but she does not seem to have known quite what that meant. St Mark tells that, early in Jesus' ministry, Mary and his brothers and sisters came to take him in hand because they thought he was out of his mind! *(Mark 3.20–21, 31–35)* Understanding comes through making the journey, as Mary discovered, like the Israelites on their long march to freedom, and at the Cross she knew that to be called is to bear the pain of the world.

To be called is not to feel worthy. Mary was troubled at the angel's greeting, and when Moses heard the voice from the burning bush he protested that he was a man of slow speech, and had to be given Aaron to speak for him. Whether raised as a prince like Moses, or born an ordinary girl like Mary, those whom God calls are not puffed up by worldly concerns, and thus they are able to be filled with his spirit. To be called is to treasure the word of God in your heart, and to believe that he will fulfil his promises.

To respond to God's call is to make decision to trust. As Mary said to the angel, 'I am the Lord's handmaid; be it unto me even as you have spoken.' And so, metaphorically, she was caught up into the Cloud, and from her came forth the saviour. Mary, like Moses, shows how life becomes a journey of trust, open to God, so that he may use us in his work in the world. Faithful is the one who calls.

PETRA – II

SIGNS

Story so far:

Liberation is one thing; living with its consequences is another. The Israelites may be free of oppression, but they are not free to live a normal life. They have become refugees, with no permanent home, no security and always on the hunt for food. 'Did God liberate us from Egypt only to let us die in this barren wilderness?' they asked. Their anger at God is directed against Moses: 'Where are we to get food?' they demand. 'You say God is with us; how can we know?'

Readings

Exodus 16.9–18, 31–35 The people complain that they have nothing to eat. God assures Moses that he has heard the cry of his people; he will rain down bread from heaven. In the evening a flock of quails flew in and settled over the camp, and in the morning manna appeared.

John 6.25–35, 41–51 The Jews ask Jesus for a sign, just like the Israelites had manna to eat in the wilderness. Jesus replies that he himself is the sign; he is the bread of life, the living bread that has come down from heaven, his own flesh, given for the life of the world.

WATER was the problem two days ago, today it is food. Grumbling dogged Moses all the way. God doesn't like the grumbling, indeed he is described as fulminating against it and punishing the people because of it; but nevertheless he shows that despite their moaning he still loves them by sending the quail and the manna, the bread from heaven. Here is a glimpse of another strand in the picture of God. Alongside the anger and violence, there is his loving concern for his people, that remains constant despite their disobedience and dissatisfaction. When they are hungry he gives them bread, and when they are thirsty he gives them water to drink.

Move on 1300 years and Jesus is teaching the people by the lakeside, and again the people are hungry. He shows them that God loves them in the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. The next day they seek Jesus out again, probably expecting another miraculous feast, but he tells them that that they must look deeper: 'Don't seek the food that perishes, but the food that endures to eternal life.' St John makes plain the meaning of the sign of the loaves; it is the gift of Jesus himself: 'This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world.' Few, if any, are convinced.

Miracles are not just wonderful events, but signs that point to a greater reality beyond. These feeding miracles point first to Moses and Jesus, authenticating their authority as God's messengers, but beyond that they point to God as their saviour. But the people don't want to see this, they just want food.

Reading the signs is not easy. Despite all that Jesus did, not least in feeding five thousand from a few loaves and fishes – a sign from heaven if ever there was one – the Pharisees persist in asking him for a sign. Perhaps they wanted an apocalyptic portent that would put the matter of

his authority beyond doubt. But if the heavens had opened, I wonder whether it would have made any difference. Signs are ambivalent; their interpretation depends on the perspective of the observer, and they never come stamped: MADE IN HEAVEN.

Many people feel like the Pharisees today. There is something about Jesus; he remains an attractive figure, but commitment, putting faith in him, is another thing. 'If only there were a sign; then I'd know for sure,' we say. I doubt it. Asking for a sign is often a way of avoiding commitment, perhaps because we know in our heart of hearts that signs are not in themselves convincing. Faith is about looking at the evidence and being prepared to move where it points, even though it falls short of proof.

This was the challenge that the Israelites faced on their journey; it is the challenge that Jesus presented to his hearers; it is the challenge of faith in every age. We've seen the signs: are we prepared to move where they point?

EDOM

KERAK

LAND

Story so far:

The people continue to complain to Moses. Aaron and Moses' sister Miriam oppose him because he has married a Cushite woman (before the need for racial purity came on the scene); Miriam is punished. The Israelites move on to Kadesh Barnea from where God wants them to invade the land he is giving them. He tells them to send out spies. The spies report that it is good land, but it is well fortified and the people are like giants! Most shrink at the prospect of trying to enter it.

Reading

Numbers 13.1–2, 17–20; 14.1–12. God commands Moses to send out men to explore the land of Canaan: one man of high rank from each ancestral tribe. After forty days they return and report that it is a good land, flowing with milk and honey, but with people like giants and well fortified cities. Moses is confident that they can conquer it, but the spies disagree. The people are utterly defeated in their hope and cry out, 'If only we had died in Egypt or in the wilderness!' Even though two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, say that God will ensure their success, the people reject them and talk of finding a new leader. God says to Moses that he has had enough of the people; he will destroy them, but from Moses he will make a nation greater and stronger than they.

EVENTS in this region since the Six Day War in 1967 remind us constantly that it is all about land, and it began with the Exodus. Recently I was asked to proof-read a book about the way in which the Biblical promise of land to the Israelites has shaped the politics of this region, and indeed still shapes them today.

Although I had been a Christian for many years, the question of the justice of the God's action in giving the land of the Canaanites to the Israelites had only recently occurred to me. I had simply accepted it as part of the story, one of the Biblical 'givens'. A turning point came when I read Elias Chacour's book *We Belong to the Land*. Chacour is an Arab Israeli, a bishop in the Maronite Church, who works for reconciliation between the two communities. He traces his ancestry back to the Canaanites; they never left the land completely, and before the advent of Zionism, lived in the land along with their Jewish neighbours. Chacour's people belong to the land just as much as the Jews.

On a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1991, my group met him, and one of the pilgrims questioned him about this: 'Doesn't it say in the Bible that God gave the land to the Jews?' Chacour replied, 'Indeed that is what it says in the OT, but what you read in the OT must be understood in the light of what you read in the NT.' And there's the rub: could the God of love revealed in Jesus have been the motivator of the Exodus and it the violence that it entailed? Chacour's answer was clear: No; he could not. As I have already suggested, underlying Israel's claim to the whole of the land is a conception of God that Jesus rejected.

This, of course, this has consequences for the present political situation in the Middle East; here, at any rate, politics and religion cannot be kept apart. I do not think the rejection of Zionism justifies the policy of those states which want to exterminate the State of Israel. That is equally ruled out by the God of love. Moreover, it is clear that the Hebrews were established in the land before the Exodus, one among several tribes who lived there; they equally belong to the land. Is it too much to hope for a return to some kind of co-existence? The answer for the present seems to

be that it is; and so, the cycle of violence begun in the Exodus is, tragically, destined to continue. The psalmist's prayer has lost none of its urgency:

> Pray for the peace of Jerusalem…
> For the sake of these my brothers and my friends,
> I shall say, 'Peace be within you.'
> For the sake of the house of the LORD our God
> I shall pray for your wellbeing. *From Psalm 122*

The question is, as always: Whom do we see as our brothers and friends?

MOUNT HOR

IMPASSE

Story so far:

God is so displeased by the constant grumbling that he has told Moses and Aaron that none of them, bar a few, like Joshua who remained faithful, will enter the promised land. They will remain in the desert for forty years – one year for each of the forty days that they explored the land. For forty years they will suffer for their sins and it will be the next generation who will enter the promised land.
Most of these 'forty years' were spent at Kadesh Barnea, not in travel. Eventually, when the next generation were ready, the time came to prepare to enter the promised land. To do this the Israelites must move north; they asked permission of the king of Edom who refused their request. Because the Edomites were well-armed, they took a different route, encountering more

opposition, fighting and skirmishes. From Kadesh they travelled to Mount Hor, where Aaron died.

Readings

Numbers 20.14-29 Envoys are sent to the king of Edom, assuring him of the Israelites' peaceful intentions, and offering to pay for any water that their flocks require, but the king refuses permission. At Mount Hor God tells Moses that Aaron is to die there because he rebelled at Meribah. Moses is instructed to accompany Aaron and his son Eleazar up the mountain where Moses stripped Aaron of his robes and invested Eleazar with them. Aaron died on the mountain and was mourned for thirty days.

Numbers 21.4–13 From Mount Hor the Israelites travelled around Edom by way of the Red Sea. (The fact that they had only just reached it, it is further evidence that it cannot have been the site of the triumph over Pharaoh's army.) There were more bitter complaints, and God punished the people with poisonous snakes. Moses interceded for the people, and God told him to set up a bronze serpent; those bitten by the snakes can look at it and recover. Their journey continued and they arrived at the River Arnon, the frontier between Moab and the Ammonites.

EVENTS have reached an impasse in both the journey and with God. The King of Edom's decision means that the Israelites must now make a detour which will bring them into conflict with other tribes. With God their relationship remains edgy; they are angry with him, and he with them. Like modern refugees, they felt that they had to leave Egypt, but the miserable conditions under which they have to make their journey causes strong discontent.

The way God responds to both the discontent and to the snake bites is more human than divine. God is shown to be in two minds: in his anger he punishes them, but then he relents and provides a means of healing; but that is not his first response. At first God is not moved by the people's suffering, no doubt considering it well-merited; only when Moses intercedes with him on their behalf does he come to their aid. He instructs Moses to set up the bronze serpent to which they can look for healing (this is the origin of the serpent entwined around a staff as the symbol of the medical profession). It is a strange God who has to be persuaded in this way. Again we are reminded of the primitive understanding of God

that characterises the story. The snakes are interpreted as God's punishment, as is the death of Aaron – an explanation for illness, misfortune and death that carried on through the Middle Ages, and is still heard today. It is an explanation that Jesus rejected, both in the story of the man born bind *(John 9.1–3)*, and in response to the collapse of the tower in Siloam which killed eighteen people. Some said that they died because they were sinners; Jesus said they were no worse sinners than the rest; all must repent *(Luke 13.1–5)*. The clear implication is that suffering and death are not sent by God as a punishment for sin.

But these matters are not the concern of the ancient authors; the thrust of the narrative is God's purposes for Israel, not his character; and in achieving these purposes they want us to know that God will not fail. God has a mission for his people (then imperfectly understood); he needs his people and will both chastise and heal them so that they fulfil their destiny. The same dual character of God – both punishing and healing – became a major theme for the prophets, especially Hosea; they revela more fully the mission of Israel, to which we shall return.

Because God has a mission for his people, the impasse has to be resolved, and it is. Although God may be their tribal champion, ensuring their success in battle, he is also expedient; he does not pit his people against foes that they cannot overcome. So he leads them away from Edom, through the territory of other tribes who are not so strong militarily, and enables Israel to triumph in the skirmishes that they have with them.

MOAB

MADABA

HOPE

Story so far:

The long sojourn in the desert, for most of which the Israelites remained at Kadesh Barnea, must have been a time when hope drained away – the same kind of feeling that pervades refugee camps in our own times. Was it it the same for Moses? Maybe at times, but deep down he must have held on to the hope that God would be true to his promise. Indeed, the religion of Israel has been described as a religion of hope. In time that hope became focussed on Jerusalem, but at the time of the Exodus Jerusalem was in other hands, and had to be conquered. This took place after the death of Joshua who led the first invasion of Canaan. By the end of his life much of the promised land had been conquered, but there was still more to be acquired. God appointed the tribe of Judah to lead the next phase of the conquest, and they with the tribe of Simeon, attacked Jerusalem and took the city. Jerusalem has ever since been the focus of Israel's identity and hope.

Readings

Judges 1.1-3, 8 The men of Judah attack Jerusalem, put it to the sword and burn it with fire

Psalm 22 Joy at arriving at the holy city.

Luke 13.31–35 Jesus laments over the city that knows not the way of peace.

ALTHOUGH the Exodus is the founding event for Jewish identity, religion and statehood, I don't really find it an edifying story. Too much of it is about violence, from the punishments meted out to the Israelites for their disobedience to the military conquest of the promised land, including the appalling sacking of Jerusalem, as we heard in the first reading. Jerusalem was the symbol of the Jewish hope, and it was believed to be God's preferred city, as the psalmist declared:

> The Lord prefers the gates of Sion
> to all Jacob's dwellings.
> Of you are told glorious things,
> O city of God. *(Psalm 87.1–2)*

Indeed, Jerusalem, as God's preferred city, is where God had chosen to dwell; 'This is my resting place for ever, here have I chosen to live.' *(Psalm 132.14)* Given the divine choice, Jerusalem's symbolic status for the Jews is easy to comprehend. But before it was conquered, it belonged to the people of the land, and for them too it has an iconic status; no wonder the Palestinians of today refuse to give it up.

Given these competing claims, it is not surprising that Jerusalem has been sacked and re-settled many times over the centuries. A symbol of hope seems to have become a symbol of our false hopes, and when Jesus came in sight of the city he wept over it because it did not know the way that led to peace *(Luke 19.41–42).* Little has changed since then. The Law given through Moses might have been a moral advance compared with the laws of the other nations, but its morality did not temper the use of violence. The problem continues today. For Jews, Christians and Muslims there remains a strong impulse for trust to be placed in military power: to achieve our hopes we must defeat our enemy. It raises the question: Where do we place our hopes?

It's an important question because in today's world hope seems in short supply. Climate change threatens to put at naught much that we have hoped for, and many of the things that have given us a sense of

security seem themselves under siege: families, marriage, secure employment, the welfare state, common values. The last century was marked by false hopes on a grand scale: fascism, communism, liberalism, science and the free market have all been heralded as harbingers of the new age, and all have been found wanting. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we have tried to do without God, and the result has been an atrophy of the spirit, an inner decay. When the historian Edward Gibbon wrote about the end of the Roman Empire he concluded that it had decayed from within; it is the same with our society today.

We all feel in our hearts something of the aimlessness and futility of modern life, the emptiness of the promises of the advertisers, the politicians and the bankers, but in spite of it all we continue to affirm that there are possibilities of good that are worth striving for. This is a sign of God's presence in our lives.

'Hope springs eternal in the human breast,' said Alexander Pope. We know we have been deluded, but at the same time we have a deep spiritual thirst; and, however we name him, we know that God alone offers our only hope. It was this conviction that kept Moses going. The only God worth our worship is the God that called him, and who was fully revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. God alone can hold our hopes and fulfil them; he is our true security. He calls us, as he called the Israelites to turn away from the golden calf, the gods of our own making, forsaking the false hopes of the world and placing all our hope in him alone.

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SALT

FREEDOM

Story so far:

The long sojourn at Kadesh not only drained hope; it must have felt like an imprisonment, something with which those detained today in refugee camps can identify. The Israelites had left Egypt to gain their freedom, but, not surprisingly, many felt that although they were 'free', they had been better off in Egypt. Was this the freedom that God had promised?

Reading

Exodus 6.28–7.6; 8.1 God commands Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Israelites leave Egypt; his brother Aaron will be his spokesman. God warns Moses that he will make Pharaoh stubborn, and despite the signs and portents that will be brought upon the land of Egypt, he will not let the people go. The oft-repeated demand that Moses addressed to Pharaoh was quite simple: 'Let my people go in order to worship me.'

LET MY PEOPLE GO! Moses' righteous demand to Pharaoh echoes down the centuries, the cry of all oppressed peoples. Freedom is the gift of God, and it was God who placed these words on Moses' lips.

Freedom in the Bible is first and foremost freedom from slavery, the condition is which a person's full humanity is denied and they are treated as an item of property, subject to the arbitrary and oppressive control of another. The prophets thunder against those who oppress their fellow Israelites referring back to Israel's experience of slavery in Egypt. Although the Law given to Moses did not ban slavery, it went further than other codes by limiting the period of slavery to six years, extending to female slaves unconditional release in the seventh year, and requiring

slave-owners to provide capital resources for their former slaves' new start in life: 'Do not let him go empty-handed. Give to him lavishly from your flock, from your threshing-floor and your winepress. Be generous to him, as the Lord your God has blessed you.' *(Deuteronomy 15.14, 18)*

It is clear from such laws that God's gift of freedom is not simply a formal freedom, like freeing a slave legally, but a substantive freedom requiring concrete and generous, even lavish, measures that will return to the slave his or her full humanity. There is a completeness about this hope that is uniquely expressed in the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, which has a purposive character that takes the biblical understanding freedom beyond that of liberation. The hope of the Israelites escaping from Egypt may have been simply for freedom *from* oppression, but in the eyes of God it was also freedom *for* worship: God told Moses to go to Pharaoh and say, 'Let my people go in order to worship me.' *(Exodus 8.1)* In the Bible freedom is never simply *freedom from*, that is, an escape from bondage, it always includes *freedom for*, that is, to enjoy the love of God and to contribute to *shalom*, in other words, to put the right values at the heart of our life.

The freedom that God willed for his people was not that espoused by some libertarians today, namely the liberty simply to act in accordance with our personal preferences *free from* coercion, constraint or other disabling factors; it is more akin to the communitarian view that sees freedom as the ability to exercise certain positive rights enabling men and women both to act as they choose and to realise their own potential; they are set *free for* the life that God wills for all, and this includes freedom from poverty, starvation, treatable disease and oppression, as well as from force and coercion. The modern concepts of individual liberty and human rights are not, of course, to be found in the Bible, but the Biblical view is not opposed to them; they are, I think, implicit in the Law, which, significantly, speaks in terms of duties rather than rights. We see this in the rules for freeing a slave which I mentioned earlier: the slave is not given a *right* to freedom; the master is placed under a *duty* to free him

after a stated number of years, and to provide generously for his welfare. These duties are the foundation of *shalom*; they set limits to the way liberty is exercised, limits that are designed to safeguard the community through which everyone's liberty is guaranteed. Freedom in the Bible has a purpose beyond individual liberty. God made us to be free in the way that he is free: freedom is the gift that enables us to love, delight in and care for one another and for all creation.

I doubt if the Israelites had this in mind as they struggled to eke out an existence in the desert, but I would guess that Moses never entirely lost sight of why God wanted his people to be free. Whatever they had in mind, the Exodus journey reminds us not only that in human society the freedom that God wills for all people has to be fought for, but also that it is not just a matter of rights, but depends on our willingness to accept the duties that *shalom* requires.

AMMAN

KITH AND KIN

Story so far:
From Kadesh Israel moved south to skirt Edom because the king refused them permission to cross his land. At Etzion-geber they turned north, passing through the lands of peoples related to them, whom God ordered them not to trouble.

Readings

Deuteronomy 2.1–9 God commands Moses to move northwards and pass through the territory of Seir, where the descendants of Esau live. With them they must not quarrel; no part of their land will be given to Israel. The same warning is given in relation to the land of the Moabites; they are the descendants of Lot, and no part of their land will be given to Israel.

Matthew 12.46-50 While Jesus is speaking to the crowd, his mother and brothers come to see him. Turning to the man who brought the message, he said, 'Who are my mother and my brothers? His disciples, he said, were his family: 'Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother and sister and mother.'

Galatians 3.26–28 Through baptism we are sons of God in union with Christ Jesus; in him all divisions are overcome: 'There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus.'

FAMILY, clan and nation are basic human ties; they are an important part of who we are, of how we understand our history, and of how we see our destiny. We speak of our 'kith and kin' as those who have some claim on our allegiance and loyalty, our charity and concern, perhaps without knowing quite who they are. Kith are all those whom we know collectively: friends, neighbours and fellow-countrymen; Kin are those descended from a common ancestor, and so connected to us by a blood relationship. Kith and kin are in a special category when it comes to the way we deal with other people, and it is significant that God commands the Israelites not to attack or quarrel with the tribes that are related to them; their lands are not to be among those to be given to Israel. Kith and kin also have a special place in the Law of Moses – indeed, the Law is given to regulate a society of kindred, not as a universal code for all peoples. A good example of this are the rules forbidding usury (taking interest on a loan); they apply only between fellow Israelites, and in later centuries this was put to good use by Jewish bankers who felt free to charge interest on loans to foreigners.

On the other hand, part of the character of Israel was a willingness to absorb outsiders into itself, so long as they submitted to the divine Lord

of the covenant; thus the Law provided: 'You must not wrong or oppress an alien; you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.' *(Exodus 22.21)* It is Israel's own experience that must determine the attitude of each Israelite to those who are less fortunate – the poor, orphans, widows and strangers – and God's special concern for them is a constant theme throughout the Bible. As Israel re-established itself after the Exile to Babylon, the prophet Zechariah is reminded by God that they must 'Administer true justice, show kindness and compassion to each other, do not oppress the widow or the father-less, the resident alien or the poor, and do not plot evil against one another.' *(Zechariah 7.10)* God made clear to his prophet that this obligation was basic to the kind of society that he wished Israel to become when he told Zechariah that they suffered exile because they shut their ears against this law, and their land became a desert. But it seems that this special concern did not extend to those outside the Covenant. Thus in the Exodus kith and kin were treated differently to the foreign nations, and were spared from conquest – no part of their lands was given to Israel; but those who did not join themselves to God's chosen people, were fair game – as we shall see.

Who was 'one of us' was important in ancient Israel, and remains so today; it establishes a bond, but at the same time it was, and is, a cause of social and political division. In ancient Israel it led to a concern for racial and religious exclusivity, which is seen particularly in the period following the return from the Exile to Babylon in the sixth century BC under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah – something to which I will return.

This was a part of the culture and tradition of Israel that Jesus challenged. It is seen clearly in the parable of the Good Samaritan, when he makes it clear that our neighbour is not confined to those of our race, culture or religion, but extends to anyone in need. Our common humanity is a more basic tie than kith and kin. And allegiance to Jesus is more basic even than family ties, as his own family discovered when they came to visit him. When he was told that his mother and family wished

to see him, he pointed to his disciples and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother and sister and mother.' *(Matthew 12.48–50)* It took time for the full implications of these words to dawn on the first Christians, and it was not until after the resurrection that the decisive change in attitude in the early Church towards those who were not Jews occurred, when Peter witnessed the anointing of Cornelius and his household by Holy Spirit, and the meaning of his vision of the sailcloth full of unclean animals dawned on him *(Acts 10.1 – 11.18)*.

St Paul builds on this in several of his letters, most notably in *Galatians* where he declares that through baptism we are children of God in union with Christ Jesus; in him all divisions are overcome: 'There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus.' *(Galatians 3.28)* As John Macquarrie said, the transnational and transracial character of the early Church was so marked that it seemed like the advent of a new humanity. And that, of course, is precisely what the Church is meant to be: a sign of humanity healed, and if we are to read the OT in the light of the NT, as Elias Chacour says, then it is also what Israel was meant to be. Our bonds extend beyond our kith and kin.

JERASH

GOD AND THE GODS

Story so far:
Moving north, all too human temptations beset the Israelites. God has commanded them not to bother the Moabites, but does that mean not responding to their embraces? Two tribes decide that they would like to settle there, so fair and fertile is the land: is that part of God's plan?

Readings

Numbers 25.1–9 As they move through Moab the men of Israel succumb to the attractions of the Moabite women, with whom they have intercourse, and who invite them to share in their sacrifices to the gods of Moab. In his anger, God orders that all who have sinned in this way are to be put to death.

Numbers 32.1–27 The Reubenites and the Gadites ask if they can settle in the land; Moses accuses them of wanting to avoid the coming battle to enter the promised land, but a compromise is agreed in which the men will fight, and their families will remain.

Mark 11.15–19 Jesus cleanses the Temple of the money-changers and traders, reminding them that it is meant to be a house of prayer for all nations.

YAHWEH is described as a jealous God. As we have seen, God is not jealous in the sense that he eyes others with envy, but in the sense that his concern is solely for Israel; he watches over them jealously as his own possession. In response Israel must worship him alone; those who fail to do so have no place among his chosen people, and must be put to death. It is easy to understand how this led to the racial and religious exclusiveness that marks the Jews in the biblical story, and which continues to mark conservative Jewish sects to this day. In later times, the Pharisees emerged as a distinct group within Israel, marked out by their

strict observance of the Law, so much so that they were known as 'the separated brethren'. St Paul was one of them.

In practice it became impossible for this exclusivity to be maintained, and Israel's failure in this regard was interpreted as the reason why misfortune befell them, in particular the Exile to Babylon. Not surprisingly, following the Return from Babylon, the leaders of Israel, Ezra and Nehemiah, insisted on a return to the former rules. Ezra was informed that the people, and even some of the priests and Levites, had not kept themselves apart from the alien population. They and their sons had taken the local women as wives, and that 'the holy race had become mixed with the local population.' So appalled was Ezra by this, that he spent a long time in prayer, confessing his people's sins. His prayer moved the people to repentance, and they resolved to put away their foreign wives, and cut themselves off from the people of the land. *(Ezra 9 & 10)*.

This is deeply shocking to modern sensibilities. We can see more clearly today, through events like the Nazi concern for the Arian purity of the Volk, that this kind of racial policy simply leads to disaster. Not only does it breed a moral weakness, it leads eventually to physical weak-ness – mixed blood leads to a more robust and healthier humanity. Whether Jesus was aware of this it is useless to speculate, but he certainly protested against this exclusivist policy in the most dramatic way when he cleansed the Temple. 'Does not scripture say, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations"? He said, 'But you have made it a robbers cave.' *(Mark 11.17)* Jesus referred to Isaiah who had declared that God would accept the offerings of foreigners who gave their allegiance to him: 'these I shall bring to my holy hill and give them joy in my house of prayer.' *(Isaiah 56.6–7)* But in Jesus' day offerings had to be purchased with special Temple currency requiring money-changers who demeaned the sacred space, and turned it into a robbers' cave, as Jeremiah had said *(Jeremiah 7.11)*.

The description of God as a jealous God does not appear in the NT; God is God of all, the only God, and it is purity of heart and devotion that makes worship acceptable, not purity of race.

AJLUN

WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE?

Story so far:
The Israelites are nearing the end of their journey. They have defeated the Amorites whose king was Sihon, and also Og, the king of Bashan (Bashan was the area around the Golan heights) and they now occupied the entire broad belt along the east bank of the Jordan, bounded by Ammon in the south and Moab in the east. The time has come to enter the promised land. God's commands about how they are to treat the people of the land were severe.

Readings

Exodus 34.10–16 God promises that he will drive out the people of the land from before the Israelites, and commands Moses not to make any alliance with them. In particular they must remove all trace of their religion: 'You must demolish their altars, smash their sacred pillars and cut down their sacred poles. You are not to bow down in worship to any other god…'

Numbers 33.50–56 Drive out all the inhabitants ... destroy their gods ... take possession of the land. If you don't drive them out they will become a thorn in your sides and will give you trouble in the land. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them.

Deuteronomy 7.2–5 *is even more violent:* …you must exterminate them… destroy them totally, show them no mercy; break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, burn their idols in the fire.'

Micah 6.6–7 What is it that the Lord requires? – 'To act justly, to love loyalty, to walk humbly with your God.'

THE PICTURE of God as a tribal champion, a national saviour, is the constant theme of the story. Not only will he defeat the Canaanites and allow Israel to conquer their land, he will also destroy those of his own people who oppose him, as we have heard. His purpose must succeed, and if not through those whom he has rescued from Egypt, then through others whom he will raise up through Moses. God is described like an autocratic dictator who will brook no opposition to his policy, and will destroy even his own people if they get in his way. Parallels with Stalinist Russia, Maoist China, Chile and Argentina under the generals, North Korea – and many other places – come to mind.

As we have moved through the story I am simply appalled by both the brutality of the conquest and the character of the God who was believed to have required it. I cannot imagine the Father of our Lord Jesus saying: 'I am giving you this land; never mind that other nations inhabit it, and have done for centuries; I give it to you. You are to drive them out, break up their sanctuaries and destroy all before you.'

How are we to respond to this? I confess that I have mixed feelings. I utterly reject the violence, especially its use in propagating religion. Violence and truth do not belong together – as hopefully we Christians have learned from the Inquisition. But I am also aware that pagan sanctuaries have a spiritual power that is not at all the same as the power of the Holy Spirit; it needs to be opposed; indeed, it needs to be dethroned. I remember visiting the former sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, the home of the Delphic oracle. It is now in ruins, but it must have been an impressive building in an equally impressive location. A shrine takes it nature, its spiritual power, from the god at its heart. Despite his charm

and sweet singing, Apollo was a violent and unforgiving god, as skilled with the bow as with the lyre. Like the rest of the Olympians he was immoral, loving women and men alike with equal promiscuous passion. Whatever the value of the oracles given in his name, they did not come from God. I felt, and said at the time, that it was just as well that his shrine was in ruins, robbed of its spiritual power.

And then… Some years later I saw the ruins of the temple of Bel at Palmyra in Syria. I marvelled at the sculpture, and felt a real sense of loss and outrage when it was destroyed by *ISIS*. And then… there is the Lady Chapel at Ely Cathedral, its wonderful carved frieze telling the story of Mary, defaced by the iconoclasts of the Reformation – a beautiful work of art and devotion ruined.

How are we to respond to the beliefs of others that we believe to be wrong, even dangerous? When they are so wrong as to constitute an incitement to violence or war, then I think they need to be opposed with force. There is, I think, a moral justification to the armed resistance to *ISIS*, for example, though that does mean that the end justifies any means used to achieve it. But more than force is required; there must also be cogent explanation of why the beliefs are wrong, even if it falls on deaf ears. But what of beliefs that do not fall into this extreme category? Do we 'demolish their altars, smash their sacred pillars and cut down their sacred poles,' destroying them totally and showing them no mercy? There have been Christians who have taken this view, like those who opposed the Cathars in the Albigensian crusade. But this can't possibly be right if God is as revealed in Jesus. When he was opposed by those who thought his views dangerously wrong, he did not resort to violence; he opposed his critics to their face, exposing their hypocrisy, and in the end he witnessed to the truth by putting his life on the line. Centuries before him, the prophet Micah had glimpsed the truth: God does not require acts of violence perpetrated without mercy; what he asks of us is 'to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk humbly with your God.' *(Micah 6.7)*

The kind of judgement that the Israelites imposed upon those whom they conquered, and which other victors have similarly imposed on those whom they vanquished, is, Jesus said, reserved for God. At the last judgement God will sort the wheat from the tares, but until that time they must be allowed to grow together (*Matthew 13.24–30*).

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UM QAIS – GADARA

THE HUMAN FACE OF GOD

Story so far:
An interlude before the invasion of Canaan – we come north to Um Qais, known in the Bible as Gadara, the location of the healing of Legion and where the herd of swine rushed into the lake.

Reading
Mark 5.1-20 The healing of Legion and the destruction of the gardarene swine.

IF WE ask what kind of God demands destruction, ethnic cleansing and deportation, we should also ask what kind of God causes a herd of pigs to be drowned, even if it is the consequence of bringing healing to a tortured soul? It is the most extraordinary action, and we have to ask if it actually happened as Mark describes. It stands out like an aberration in

the story of Jesus, in similar vein to the parable of the wasteful steward whom Jesus commended for his sharp practice *(Luke 16.1–8)*. Both the healing and the parable seem wrong to our eyes: in the first case because it exalts dramatically the human creation over the animal creation, and in the second case because it commends dishonesty. The morality of the action in both cases seems akin to that of the God of the Exodus.

I find myself reminded that Jesus was a man of his times, and perhaps that is the point. We believe that he was the Son of God, but he was not actually God, as the theologian Keith Ward has said. God is infinite; Jesus was a finite human being; God is ineffable, that is beyond description; Jesus is not; he is described for us in the gospels; he comes across as a real person. Bishop John Robinson described him as the human face of God, and Bishop John Austin Baker said that if the almighty, ineffable God is expressed in human form, Jesus is what you get. And his human form necessarily was shaped by the knowledge and attitudes of his time and race. He promised that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth, and I believe we see the working out of that promise in the way that our human understanding of the wonders of the created world has increased exponentially since Jesus' time, and I am sure that God delights in that.

While we affirm that in Jesus we see the most complete revelation of God's nature that is possible in human form, it seems that through the Holy Spirit, the process of understanding the nature of God that began in the Exodus and continued through the prophets, is still unfolding. I rather think that it is a process that is without end. What Jesus shows us above all is that at the heart of that process is self-giving love.

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MOUNT NEBO

THE PROMISED LAND

Story so far:

Moses has led the people for forty years, and has made them into a force that can conquer the promised land, but he is not to enter the land; on this mountain his leadership ends.

Readings

Deuteronomy 32.48-52 Moses is to see the land from Mt Nebo where he will die.

Jeremiah 31.31-34 God will make a new covenant with his people; he will put his law in their minds and write it on their hearts: 'All will know me,' he promised, 'and I will forgive their wickedness.'

John 1.1-5, 10-18 The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

JORDAN is described as the ancient Holy Land, and as we've journeyed in the footsteps of Moses we've seen what this means. All the strange names we stumble over in the Bible – Midian, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Gilead – now seem less strange. The OT has become a bit more alive and so has Moses. And at this place where he died, we remember that not even he was spared the wrath of God, dying before his mission was accomplished because he too had wavered. Even so, his is the brooding spirit behind the story. The whole of the OT: laws, ritual, history and prophecy, looks back to him. He was the prophet who knew God face to face, and following in his footsteps we have also made a journey into our own understanding of God.

Mosaic religion is essentially a religion of Law, and over the centuries, the Law was elaborated into a complex code that governed every aspect of life. The law prohibited working on the sabbath, so it was important to define what constituted work; travel on the sabbath was restricted, so a 'sabbath's day's journey' had to be defined, and so it went on. In the end the law became so complex that most people were unable to keep it, and lived to a greater or lesser extent outside the law. This all came to a head in Jesus' dispute with the Pharisees, the strictest group in Israel who prided themselves with their meticulous keeping of the law in every particular. Their righteousness was the righteousness of an elite; Jesus taught that God's concern was with the ordinary people on whom the elite looked down. He sat light to their laws; righteousness, he said, was more a matter of inner intentions than outward actions; he points to the sprit rather than the letter of the law. It is better, he said, to have the spirit of the law in our hearts than to be over-concerned about acting out the minutiae of the law in our lives. Jeremiah prophesied that God would make a new covenant, and it was inaugurated through Jesus, a covenant founded on grace, not on law.

Moses' prophecy that there would arise in Israel another prophet like him, who saw God face to face, was, we believe, fulfilled in Jesus. God's final revelation came through him. Moses may have seen God face to face, but Jesus is his human face. As St John put it, 'The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.'

Grace is best thought of as loving-kindness, an overflowing generosity that reaches out to people with a willingness to forgive and a desire to be reconciled. There is a long-suffering quality about God, which is glimpsed in the Exodus story – despite his wrath he does not let Israel go – but which is seen fully in Jesus. This suffering love is the foundation of the new covenant.

Jesus is the truth; he shows us the human face of God. God is Christlike. If we want to know what God is like we look to him. God has always been Christlike, he hasn't had a change of heart, but in former

times this was not seen. There were glimpses, as in his willingness to forgive the Israelites, and in Isaiah's picture of the suffering servant, but with the coming of Jesus the truth has been made plain for all to see. And part of that truth is that the promised land is not a physical place, but a state of grace in which we see the truth.

Lent is a time when we reflect on our spiritual journey, and try to let the reality of God become clearer to us, so that at Easter we can celebrate the new life that he offers us in Jesus, the outpouring of his grace. Our Exodus, our journey to freedom, is to follow his way of self-giving. Like the journey of the Israelites this is not an easy call, but it is the way that we shall find our peace.

BETHANY-BEYOND-JORDAN

RENEWAL IN CHRIST

Story so far:
St John tells us that John the Baptist was baptising at Bethany-Beyond-Jordan, a location on the Jordanian side of the river (John 1.28). Although St John does not describe Jesus' baptism like the other gospel writers, it is clear that it was was here that Jesus was baptised, and he records John the Baptist's testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven like a dove and come to rest on him. I did not know him; but he who sent me to baptise in water had told me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and rest is the one who will baptise in Holy Spirit." I have seen and borne witness: this is God's Chosen One.'

Readings

Isaiah 49.1-6 It is too small a thing for you to restore the tribes of Israel..., I will make you a light for the gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

Ephesians 2.11-18 Those who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ ... He is our peace; [he] has abolished in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. By his death he has abolished the enmity between the nations, and made them one.

AT THE end of our pilgrimage we come to this place to renew our baptismal promises, where, according to St John, Jesus himself was baptised. As we do so we have in mind that he is the human face of God, the Lord of the Exodus. As we affirm our allegiance to him as our Lord and Saviour, we remind ourselves that he is the final picture in a changing series, and we need to be clear about the One in whom we place our trust.

The early pictures are primitive. Israel was in some respects just like its neighbours, and Yahweh was perceived like a pagan god, a tribal champion. If things went well for you in battle, and in other aspects of life, then that was a sign that your god was with you, that he was stronger than the gods of your enemies. It took time for a more ethical conception to develop, including the experience of total defeat and exile to Babylon. In Babylon the prophet known as Second Isaiah saw Yahweh differently: his concern is not just for Israel but for all peoples. Addressing his servant, he says, 'It is too small a thing for you to restore the tribes of Israel... I will make you a light for the gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.' *(Isaiah 49.6)* Although Second Isaiah's vision never took hold in Israel, it was his picture of God that the first Christians recognised in Jesus, and that became the dominant NT image, as we heard in the reading from the Letter to the Ephesians. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Servant figure in Isaiah, and in him the divided nations are reconciled.

But old ideas live on. It is almost four years ago that Brother Roger of Taizé was murdered. It happened in the middle of a week dominated by violent news, including the forced evacuation, by the Israeli government, of the Jewish settlements in Gaza. As some of the settlers were carried from their homes they cried out to God, 'Why have you done this to us? Be faithful to your promises. Some even called the police and soldiers, their fellow Israelis, 'Nazis.' It was a grim business.

It was, of course, the latest chapter in a saga that goes back to the Exodus. For Jews of a more fundamentalist outlook (who are prominent in the settler communities), the restoration of the whole of the Land promised by God to the Jews, is one of the conditions for the coming of the Messiah. And there are some Christians who take a similar view, believing that the restoration of the land is a condition for the second coming of Christ. Both groups – an unpropitious alliance between the Jewish and Christian right wings – exhibit the demanding, inflexible attitudes characteristic of religious fundamentalists.

The life of Brother Roger tells a different story. Born in Switzerland, during the Second World War he moved to France and set up a house on the frontier between the occupied and Vichy zones where he cared for the displaced and injured wherever they came from. He devoted his life to a Pilgrimage of Peace on Earth, and established the ecumenical Taizé Community, as a sign of reconciliation between divided Christians. The difference between the settlers of Gaza and Brother Roger rests essentially in their picture of God, and that has to do with how we see his love.

In the Exodus story God is often described as loving Israel, but, as I have said, it was a possessive, demanding love, like a parent who wants the best for their child, not so much for the child's sake but because of what it says about them, and of course such parents are easily moved to wrath when the child fails to live up to their expectations. Jesus also taught that God is a God of love, but for him the love of God is seen in the willingness of the parent to bear the burdens of the child, to go the second mile, to rejoice with them in joy and to weep with them in sorrow, and in the end to lay down his life for their good. This is the God that inspired Brother Roger in his work, and in whom we believe and trust.

As we renew our baptismal promises, we should reflect on our own picture of God. God is unchanging; it is our picture of him that changes; it is our understanding of his nature, his purposes and his ways that develops. We do not have to pretend that the picture we see in the Exodus is one with the pictures given by Second Isaiah and St Paul; for us, the unchanging God is revealed fully in Jesus, and all other conceptions and pictures have to be read in the light of that revelation. Someone once said that the most important thing is to get your conception of God right; in these lands we see what happens when you get it wrong.
