

30 August 2020
Exodus 3:1-15
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

“You are our God. We worship you.”

We read last week of Peter’s dramatic confession: in response to Jesus’ question “Who do you say that I am?”, Peter replied “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”.

And when we put that alongside today’s passage from Exodus in which God names himself in the mysterious “I am who I am”, we’re faced with the real question of who is, or what is the nature of, this God and this Messiah Jesus whom we worship?

These passages draw my mind immediately to the historic creeds or other affirmations of faith we make during our worship, such as the one from page 481 of our New Zealand Prayer Book.

The page 481 affirmation begins, “You, O God, are supreme and holy.” But I was really struck today by the ending: “You are our God. We worship you.”

The words “You are our God” implies a choice, for it would be possible for one to say instead “Someone or something else is my God”, or “You are not my God”.

It is important that we remember that it is a choice; a choice we each have to make personally. Regardless of whether we come to faith later in life, or are in a sense born into it, ultimately each of us must make our own decision for or against Christ. As the saying goes, “God has no grandchildren”: each person, each generation, must make their own decision by which they accept their adoption into the family of God.

As we heard last week, to affirm that Jesus is Messiah (King) is profoundly significant in a world that then and still now regards others as having all authority. The same significance pertains to the affirmation that this God is our God, in a world that devotes its life in service and subservience to other gods and to things that humans use to stand in for gods to try to address their needs and wants.

“You are our God.”

But the problem with the statement “You are our God”, and the problem with the idea that it is a choice, is that it could imply possession, domestication, or a consumer mentality.

The thing is that *this* God – who is the only God in the truest and fullest sense of that world – is actually God of the whole cosmos and of all people *whether they choose him or not*. King Jesus will ultimately rule the whole world, whether we bow the knee to him or not. The one we worship as “our God” is not ours to own, to possess, to control, to tame or to apply to our purposes and wants. The one we worship as “our God” is not like just one of many brands of baked beans which we can pick and choose between without real consequence; or substitute for something else when our palates get a little jaded.

Today’s readings from Exodus and Matthew should shake us from any such wrong sense of “our God”. In Exodus we are challenged first by the utter holiness of God.¹ When the Angel of the Lord came to Moses, he clothed himself in flames of fire from within a bush. Fire often appears in the Bible as a sign and symbol of God’s holiness. God’s glory is an unapproachable brightness. God is totally separate and distinct from his creation, with his own distinctive and unique characteristics. God’s holiness is perfectly pure, moral and ethical; and God demands the same holiness in his people. This moral perfection therefore endangers sinners. The holiness of God is an active force, embracing all that conforms to it, and destroying all that offends it. The trepidation humans feel before the Lord is not, therefore, simply the trembling of the lowly before an almighty one, or of the created before their creator. Rather this is the fear of sinners endangered by the holiness that must deal with sin.

This is the God Moses encounters. When asked to give his name, God answers “I am who I am.” (“I am who I am” could also be translated “I will be what I will be”.)

God just *is*. God doesn’t need to identify himself or justify himself to anyone.

¹ The following owes much to Motyer, pp.68-74

God just *is*. But the presence of this God is not a bare *is*, a mere existence: it is a living force, full of life. In no situation is he an ornamental extra; in every situation he is the key active participant.

God just *is*. He needs no outside power or nourishing. God is bursting with his own infinitely abundant vitality. God is inexhaustible. Whatever circumstances arise, God will be there and will be sufficient to the need.

God just *is*. He needs no invitation. His own will is paramount. God alone chooses where and how he will act, where he will bestow grace or mercy.

God just *is*, has been forever, and will continue to be forever. God remains *God*. We can neither add to nor take away from his glory and power.

God is referred to again and again through the Old Testament as ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ I am reminded that the God whom Moses encounters in the burning bush is God of the covenant; God who is ever faithful; God who is consistent and constant.

‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ reminds me too that God is God of relationship with humans. This is the God who hears the cry of his people, and who comes down to rescue them. This is the God who will be *with* Moses, not distant and aloof.

This is the God who, while being completely separate and morally perfect, nevertheless invites sinful Moses to come near. God desires us to be in his presence; but how do we come before the holy God Almighty?

We see here that God is present in the fire of the burning bush as the Angel of God. This is a way of making the encounter safe for Moses: God makes himself present among sinful people in a way that means they are not destroyed in the encounter.

God made himself supremely present in the person of Jesus. When we come to the time of Jesus, the time of our reading from Matthew’s gospel, 1300 or so years after Moses, there is much that is similar in the state of the people of God. They are in

their homeland: the exodus from Egypt has happened, and the return from the Babylonian exile during the 5th century BC has happened. But the *problem* of exile, the problem of being a people under an ungodly ruler, the problem of the apparent failure of the covenant, still exists. A new kind of exodus is looked for to re-establish the nation as a people under God's rule. They are looking for their anointed King, the Messiah, to lead this. This was expected to involve two aspects in particular: first, decisive military defeat of Israel's enemies, and second, rebuilding or cleansing the Temple.

So the disciples have come to see (or Peter at least has come to see) – through the weight of the combination of Jesus' words and symbolic actions and practical deeds – that Jesus is more than a prophet. He was God's Messiah. He was not just speaking God's word against the wicked leaders and rulers of the time. He was in fact God's king, who would replace these wicked ones. You can imagine the excitement that might have accompanied Peter's declaration.

But

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things ... and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Hang on a minute! That's not in the programme. A dead Messiah is no messiah at all; just a pretender. No wonder Peter reacts.

The obvious approach to being Messiah, the obvious approach to establishing the kingdom of God would be to march on Jerusalem, gather supporters, fight a surprise battle, take over the Temple, and install Jesus as king.

The approach that Jesus is going to take however is the exact opposite. It *will* involve suffering and death – but it will be his, not his opponents. It *will* involve confrontation with the rulers and authorities in Jerusalem – but they, not he, will appear to win the battle.²

But, he says, ultimately he will be vindicated – on the third day, he will be raised from the dead.

² Wright, *Matthew*, p.10

At the time Jesus utters these words, however, neither Peter nor any of the others have any concept of what he might be talking about in this bit.

Jesus' victory and vindication come at his resurrection – victory over death, a victory which demonstrated that all he had stood for was in fact true, a victory that demonstrated God's special favour, a victory which showed that Jesus was indeed God's Messiah, God's rightful ruler of Israel and for all the world. The victory of Jesus, the "Son of Man coming in his kingdom", occurs at the resurrection – which did of course occur before those standing before him had died. So when he had risen from the dead, and just before his ascension, Jesus declared "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." [Matt 28:18] It was a declaration of his vindication.

This Jesus, already vindicated and reigning, will return at the end of the age.

"You are our God. We worship you."

Flowing out of *this* God, *this* Messiah Jesus, his purpose and his mission, are implications for his followers. Jesus isn't going to build a new Jerusalem as an actual city; he isn't going to build a new physical Temple. Rather he is, through the Holy Spirit, going to build a Church, an *ecclesia*, an assembly; a new community oriented around himself: the plural "We" in our affirmation is significant. Through allegiance to Jesus as God's Messiah, this new community will become the people through whom God will put the world to rights, establishing justice and peace.

But this will only occur if their allegiance goes all the way. For the disciples then and there, it means going with Jesus to Jerusalem to risk death. For us, it means following him, no matter what it takes.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

This is not about seeking martyrdom for the sake of it. But what it is about is wholehearted loyalty, a loyalty that holds nothing back. This is wholehearted worship.

It is a loyalty not just to Jesus, but also to his whole approach: methods matter, and for Jesus the method is love and goodness. As Paul says to the Romans, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil. ... Do not take revenge.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

In Romans 12, this Jesus Way of self-denial flows out of the victory of Jesus. In dying on the cross and rising again, good has triumphed over evil. And that victory is to be implemented in the lives of God’s people.³ We must abandon the normal ways of doing good, of careful calculation of moral balances, of rights rewarded and wrongs paid back in revenge. Instead there should be generous, self-giving, overflowing love, meeting others where they are with blessing and peace. No cursing, no pride, no vengeance, but the quiet confidence that the God of the cross and burning bush has triumphed over evil, and will at the last put all wrongs to rights – something that we have a part in working towards.

And if we, like Moses, ever worry that our part in all this work of God might be beyond us, let us remember who it is that calls us, equips us, sends us forth, and remains with us throughout.

This is our God. This is our worship.

Sources:

- Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, London: IVP 2005 [Bible Speaks Today]
- Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, London: SPCK 1996
- Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays, Years A, B, & C: Biblical meditations on the Christian year*. London: SPCK 2012
- Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 2, chapters 16-28*
- France, *Matthew*, TNTC
- Green, *The Message of Matthew*, IVP BST

³ The following from Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays* p.101