

3 September 2023

Exodus 3:1-5
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

I met an interesting person the other day. He was born into an oppressed people living in a land that was not their own; his very life was in danger from the moment he was born. He had a wonderful escape from certain death, but it came at the cost of being given up by his father and mother. He came to be raised in a whanau holding a position of considerable mana, who amazingly seemed to overlook his origins. But he never forgot his own race, and when he reached adulthood he started to seek understanding of them and their situation.

Things seemed to be going well for the young man, but he was a bit of a hot-head. One day, in a fit of righteous rage, he committed a murder. When investigators started closing in on him, he emigrated. He settled down in this new land where he was assumed to be of the race of his adoptive family. There he married one of the local girls and started a family.

He didn't say whether he'd had any religious experience or understanding in his youth: while it was part of his birth-family's practice, it certainly wasn't something owned by his adoptive whanau. But whether religious or not, he told me about this one day where he had a profound revelation of God. On a day when his job had taken him far away from regular society, he experienced a deep sense of God's call to go back to his own people and to be a leader among them.

Given his background he felt completely unworthy, inadequate and ill-equipped.

Friday was the feast of the Builders of the Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia. In the reference book *For All the Saints* the following explanation is given for the feast:

A number of significant people in the history of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia are remembered individually in the Calendar, but the growth of the church in the South Pacific owes a very great deal as well to many, many others, who by their faithful service and enthusiastic support have shaped the church that we have inherited.

The initial shape was given by the members of the Church Missionary Society, whose work among the Māori people laid the foundations of Christianity among many of the tribes. The work of the Church Missionary Society lasted beyond 1840, but faded significantly during the wars of the 1860s. The missionaries were ably assisted in many cases by their wives, who toiled and laboured alongside them.

*The next major development involved those who helped the formation of the church in the new settler colonies. These people were intent on establishing their familiar church in a new land, but without the English connection with the state. A focus as always was *The Book of Common Prayer*, or its Māori translation, *Te Rāwiri*. Along with that went the hymns and music of the Church of England.*

The next generation was dominated by the work of establishing parishes and churches. Parishioners raised funds to erect buildings, mostly in the familiar style of the nineteenth century Gothic revival, and they provided for the plant and equipment for the many activities of the church. An emerging significant body was the Mothers' Union, in origin a product of the late nineteenth century concern for purity and godliness. In many respects it gave women a status denied them in the decision making processes of the church.

The wars and the depression dominated the early decades of the twentieth century. A growing social concern was reflected in the work of the city missions in the major centres. The younger generation of church people benefited from important developments in Bible classes and in youth groups, which were a significant feature of many western countries from the 1920s. ...

The characteristic feature of the post-war phase has been a willingness to build a distinctively New Zealand church. The leadership of the church was by then found from among New Zealanders themselves. In the fields of liturgy, social attitudes, and the place of women in the ordained ministry, the Church of the Province became increasingly confident about its own convictions and insights. The charismatic movement from the 1960s onwards made a significant impact. In the unique nature of New Zealand's race relations, the church has heeded not only the emerging strong voice of the Māori church, but has taken seriously its Polynesian partner and

tried to address the issues of cultural diversity. All this is reflected in the church's new name: "The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia".

Thus, the work of individuals and groups has built up the church, and it has developed a distinctive style among the churches of the Anglican Communion.¹

So much of this history of the development of the Anglican Church as we know it today has relied upon people who, like the fellow I mentioned at the beginning, were lay people who came from unexpected origins and life experiences, and who would have felt unworthy and unready for the call to lead, minister, witness or serve.

I met an interesting person the other day. He was born into an oppressed people living in a land that was not their own; his very life was in danger from the moment he was born.

And his name was, of course, Moses.

Moses felt himself unworthy and ill-equipped for the calling that followed, but he at least displayed an attentiveness and openness to wonder that meant he stopped and turned aside when he came across the burning bush.

Moses' unexpected calling by God was to go to Pharaoh to bring his countrymen out of slavery in Egypt. Little was he to know that this would begin a forty year project. A significant part of the project – and indeed the reason it took forty years for a trip of a distance that should have taken perhaps a month – was that it was all about the formation of the Israelites into a distinctive people of God, people who would trust in God alone and serve him only. That formation was to continue in a very different form over a thousand years later in the close discipleship that Jesus would develop in just twelve people; and then through the witness of that small band to blossom out into a worldwide body. Throughout it was about learning the unexpected way of the cross – an unexpected way because the concerns of God are very different to the

¹ Ken Booth, *For All the Saints*, pp.598-599. See also Keith Newman, *Bible and Treaty*, pp.24ff, and Allan Davidson, *Christianity*, pp.7-18.

usual human concerns.² It was about learning the way of sincere love in action, overcoming evil with good.³

They were to learn a way that was counter-cultural then: it remains counter-cultural now. The builders of the church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia had to discern how to make the good news of Jesus intelligible and how to make worship meaningful in a context and culture far from the lands from which they came; while at the same time being ready to challenge the forces that would want to make the gospel indistinguishable from either the culture from which they came or the culture in which they now found themselves immersed. That continues to be the challenge we face: in important but different ways we need to be both relevant *and* radically distinctive.

I met an interesting person the other day. I met him in the pages of my Bible.

An important part of our formation as the people of God has to be developing deeper knowledge of the Bible. This is not about being able to simply parrot historical facts; nor is it about having a set of rules drummed into us; nor acquiring interesting life and relationship “hacks” or a fund of great stories. We read and re-read, study, discuss, and chew over the Bible primarily so that through it we encounter the living God. Through it we find that God is outworking a plan in which his kingdom has begun and has come through Christ crucified and risen, a plan in which a new world is being brought into being. Through it we find that we are invited to become participants in this plan and in the new world that is to come. Through it we find that we, like Moses, are called into the service of the living God and are equipped despite our histories, hurts, inadequacies and sins.

Today [at 10am] we acknowledge and congratulate Jenny, Githa, and David who have completed EfM, a programme of intentional study of the Bible, of God and of the church, the body of Christ. EfM is one specific way of undergoing formation.

² Matthew 16:23; 24-25

³ Romans 12:9, 21

There are other ways too. The question is less about the way; and more about our willingness to be open to the transforming work of God.

It is not for nothing that in his book on spiritual disciplines, John Ortberg gives his chapter on the practice of reflection on scripture the title, “An undivided life”. He writes:

Most of us know what it is to be a wave on the sea, to be pulled towards this life of Christ and yet held back by a secret sin we haven’t been willing to renounce or get help for. We long to be servants but are unwilling to leave the comfort of the lounge chair. We’d like to be humble – but what if no one notices? So we go back and forth.

It is a miserable way to live, Jesus said. “The secret of life is pursuing one thing.”

If we want to be saved from double-mindedness, we must “be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” An indispensable practice is to have our minds re-formed by immersing them in Scripture.⁴

I met an interesting person the other day. I met him in the pages of my Bible. And no, I’m not talking about Moses this time. I’m talking about the One who revealed himself to Moses, calling to him from within a burning bush; the One who reveals himself as “I am who I am”, or “I will be what I will be”; the deepest source, the highest court, the final cause, the One Who Is, the Person behind all personality.⁵

This same God reveals himself in other ways too, beyond the pages of the Bible (but always in continuity and coherence with that biblical revelation). This same God reveals himself to *us* and calls us all into his service in diverse ways. Despite our lack of worth, despite our hesitations and inadequacies, God calls us and equips us for service.

⁴ John Ortberg, *Life*, pp.177-178. See also Watson, *Discipleship*, pp.140-165, and Willard, *Disciplines*, particularly pp.176-177

⁵ Tom Wright, *Twelve*, p.100

This call is not for the benefit of ourselves alone, but is for his good purposes; it is because in our day still people need to be set free to live the kind of life God desires for us, the life of the new age and of the world to come.

Sources:

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