**Third Sunday of Lent Year C**

**20th March 2022**

**First Reading Exodus 3:1-8 & 13-15**

All three of our readings to-day bristle with problems. Let us take them one at a time. It cannot be overstating the case to say that the Exodus passage is one of the most important in the whole of the Hebrew scriptures. It is also true to say that we are uncertain of the exact meaning.

The problem lies in the name God reveals to Moses. To know someone’s name in Judaism was a great privilege, reserved for intimates. It meant that you could access the person and call on them for help when needed.

In the reading God’s name is composed of four Hebrew consonants, read from right to left and roughly represented by the English letters YHWH (L to R). Written Hebrew does not have vowels and so we do not know how it would have been pronounced. In practice it never was pronounced because God’s name was too holy to be uttered by human beings. So, when read aloud in the Synagogue, the reader would substitute another word altogether, ‘Adonai’ which meant the ‘LORD’ which is how it is printed in the Authorised Version of the Bible.

We think that YHWH formed the stem of a Hebrew word meaning ‘to be’ thus implying life, as opposed to other deities which lack life. So, it is translated ‘I AM’ which phrase, Jesus took upon himself, according to John. (e.g. 6;34-35)

Another clue underlying the same idea of life is the sight Moses had of the burning bush, which was never consumed. Ancient Greek philosophy supposed the Universe to comprise four elements: Fire, Water, Earth, and Air. The highest of these was Fire. It was the most spiritual, the most lively, both destructive and purifying at the same time.

These four elements can also be arranged in ascending order, from lower to higher. Earth rises out of Water, Air is above the Earth, and Fire is superior to all as seen by the daily appearance of the sun. So, fire is a sign of the proximity of YHWH

You may be puzzled by the name of the ‘mountain of God’ which in the second sentence is ‘Horeb’ but elsewhere, ‘Sinai’ We are uncertain, but it is possible that the former is the Canaanite name and the latter the Hebrew or Egyptian name for the same place. Or, it may be that Sinai refers to the particular mountain, with Horeb used for the range. It may be that it was a volcanic mountain which would explain the fireworks, smoke and tremors which impressed the Israelites.

**Responsorial Psalm: 102:1-4, 6-5, 11**

In this psalm we praise God for showing his ways to Moses, and his works to the people of Israel. A psalm sung by Israel about the Exodus becomes a hymn of the Christian community celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ.

**Second Reading 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12**

The problem I associate with the second reading is Paul’s bizarre picture of a rock following the Israelites during their forty years in the desert to provide them with drinking water. The fact is that Paul inherited this picture from the Midrash, though he was the first to identify the rock with Christ. (see footnote)

Desert life would certainly require water from oases or wells or springs, but rather than mobile rocks, we should guess that the Israelites came across them during their journey. But, looking back over the generations this was attributed to miraculous provision.

I think it also helps if we realise that ‘forty’ years was a symbolic number meaning ‘a complete period’ as it might be a generation. Also, the Exodus was probably not one event but part of a general migration of people from Egypt to Canaan over many years and through harsh desert conditions. It survived in Israel’s memory as a formative period of great importance. Specific events told and retold in oral tradition took on miraculous properties and Moses and God became entwined in a relationship of romantic fantasy.

According to Exodus 13:21-22 a pillar of cloud went before the Israelites by day and a ‘pillar of fire’ by night. In Psalm 105:39 it is said that 'he spread a cloud to cover them' and in Wisdom 19:7 the cloud 'overshadowed the camp.'

If the origin of these details was a volcano (and we must remember that the migration followed the line of the Great Rift Valley) the columns of smoke and fire would appear as a focal point for their direction of travel and with the passage of time would be remembered as a supernatural guide.

To illustrate his point, Paul draws an analogy with Israel in the wilderness and finds in the Exodus story types of the two major Christian sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist: the children of Israel were baptized when they passed through the cloud and through the Red Sea, and they were nourished with spiritual food and drink by the manna from the sky and the water from the rock in the wilderness.

**Gospel Luke 13:1-9**

Jesus here refers to two recent disasters, otherwise unknown to historians. One was the outrage of a tyrant, the other an accident involving construction workers in Siloam. From both events he draws a warning for Israel. Unless the nation repents, it too will perish. For me, this is problematic, because it seems to buy in to the wide-spread idea that God punishes individual sins so that if you suffer, then you have sinned.

For Jesus, repentance means accepting his message of God's kingdom. The parable of the fig tree reinforces the challenge to repent. This provides a link with the second reading: "Let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." Neither the old Israel nor the new Christian Church dare presume upon a false sense of security.

In popular religion from pre-history any misfortune comes to be regarded as divine chastisement for personal sins. It is after all but a short step from the belief that God punishes sin to a consideration of the accidents, mishaps, and so on that befall a person as penalties directly inflicted by God.

Today's Gospel remembers how Jesus was once asked a question on the subject. Jesus' reply is that the mishaps that befall people are no indication at all that they are sinners. Yet it is equally true, he says, that sin calls for repentance.

Though Jesus sounds close to the traditional assumption mentioned above, he explicitly denies a link between the two incidents and the justice of God.

I also find the second paragraph difficult when it implies that Divine approval depends on good works. The tree will be spared if it produces a crop. The fig tree symbolized Israel (see Hosea 9:10; and Jeremiah 8:13) Now the axe is laid to the root of the tree (Matthew 3:10); this is the last chance. If, in the short moment left, Israel does not bring forth the fruits of repentance the time of grace will have run out. Throughout, the urgency of the hour is stressed and the warning is plain.

Jesus was addressing a Jewish crowd which was divided over him. He is warning that unless they make a commitment, they will lose the promises; the kingdom will be taken from them and given to the Gentiles; the nation will end in revolt and Jerusalem in ruins. It must be remembered that this was actually taking place at the time of writing and as far as Luke’s readers could see, proved that Jesus had been right in his warning. As Christians they had made the commitment and received pardon. It is retrospective and therefore does not conflict with Paul’s line that God treats us graciously and that no-one can deserve salvation.

**Midrash and Hadith**

Midrash was the traditional Jewish interpretation and commentary on the Scriptural stories. With age Midrash gradually acquired an authority close to the original. Muslims to-day have precisely the same situation with the Hadith which are the sayings of Mohammed, and the Qu’ran which is his written teaching.