

And God Changed His Mind

a sermon preached on the

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at

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Lection: Exodus 32:7-14; Luke 15:1-32

“And God changed his mind about the disaster he had planned to bring on his people.” It is not in the least how we are taught to think of God, nor how we like to think of God. Isn't God the stable centre at the heart of a bewildering world of change – “Change and decay in all around I see; O thou who changest not, abide with me.” Yet here, God changes his mind, and, what is more, under persuasion from Moses, who takes one of the oldest lines in the pleading book: “Look, God, you did a great job getting your people out of Egypt. Do you really want to lose face by giving the Egyptians grounds for saying they were right all along and that you never intended more than taking your people off into the desert to wipe them out with no collateral damage to Egypt.” (I just added that last little bit). “And remember what you said to Abraham about making their descendants like the sand on the seashore. If you wipe this lot out, that's going to be a bit tricky.” And God buys this argument and lets them off.

It's pretty easy to take the mickey out of this passage and to picture God here as some kind of rather dense Tudor king. We taped the series for later viewing, but the more I hear about the series, the more I am convinced that I will learn nothing much about history. But here in Exodus is God with little better integrity.

But all this is to miss the point of this story. What is so astonishing about the story at all is that there is this kind of conversation between Moses and God. Elsewhere in Exodus, it says, “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Ex 33:11). Here we touch on the intimate relationship between Israel and Israel's God. There is a fundamental conviction that this is a close personal relationship with God, where it is OK to talk to God like this, can even have an argument with God, and win, in much the same way as you might seek to restrain a friend who is in danger of losing his rag and doing something he would later regret.

In any culture and any age this is an extraordinary relationship to have with God. What sort of a God is this, but one who travels with us. Of course there are expectations of this relationship, but it is an intimate relationship. It may be mainly between Moses and God and may be used to reinforce the controlling power of Moses over these stropy ex-slaves from Egypt who now have to forge a new community out here in the Sinai desert and become the kind of people God is calling them to be. But it is a calling, an invitation to a continuing relationship, a covenant relationship where God will, in the end not give up on Israel, and Israel will over and over again fall short of what the know God calls them to be, dust themselves down and reclaim the covenant relationship with God as grounds for continuing hope.

You can see the same kind of thing in the Psalm. Again it is easy to dismiss this as abject breast-beating, the sort of grovelling thing we are now too grown up to do, the very kind of behaviour that is infantile and from which we should emerge into the sunshine of human maturity and adult responsibility. Well I have no interest in encouraging any kind of infantilism or immaturity, though there's plenty of it around, and that's just among the adults of the population! I have my own moments, just ask my wife!

No what this Psalm addresses, if not always in a comfortable manner, is that we do not operate all the time as rational mature human beings; we are not self-made people, and if we think we are, we misunderstand ourselves, and, what is worse, have nowhere to go when it all turns to custard, as from time to time it invariably does. Where do we turn when, not out of our badness, but even out of our goodness, it all comes apart in our hands. There was that moving story on TV

the other night from the Mum of the teenager involved in the murder in Auckland. Was she mad, bad and dangerous to know? Not a bit of it. She had done her best to be a good Mum and bring her kids up right. Where then can we turn except to God and say “Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create a clean heart in me, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.” For it is in our relationship with God that the very hope of acceptance, forgiveness and wholeness lie.

And just in case we miss the point, there are two stories in the Gospel reading to drive the point home. There are plenty of people in life who would dearly like to draw a line in the sand and put the acceptable people on this side and the rest on that side – beyond the pale, untouchable, outcasts. It comes in many different forms. You know the Gilbert and Sullivan ditty – I’ve got them on the list, and they’ll none of them be missed, they’ll none of them be missed.

The bad news, or rather the good news, because we are all on someone’s list of those who will not be missed, is that God does not have a list. The Pharisees were the later devotees of the Temple after the exile, who knew only too well that the exile was the result of Israel’s failure to be the kind of faithful people God had called them to be. God had finally given up on them and, even if he did not wipe them out, he had at the very least sent them off into exile. Whether that is a proper theological reading of the exile need not concern us here. When the exile was over, those who returned to Jerusalem said, Never again. And one of the lines some of them took was to defend the purity of the nation. Those who failed to live as true Israelites were sinners.

Then comes Jesus. In a lovely reverse of the situation with Moses, it is God this time who has to argue with these latter day defenders of Moses that they have failed to understand God’s will to relationship, even with sinners. The opening phrase is the clue to these two parables: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Jesus, in the name of God, has just rubbed out the lines we draw in the sand. There are no outsiders.

Can we bear to live like that? Well here in the Eucharist, I can, by the grace of God. And also, by the grace of God, it can begin to overflow from there into my life.

