

ViralStJames Bible Study #13: Turning Aside

The Background – A time for reflection and refreshing

Exodus 3:1-12

Although the pandemic is still with us, we are now entering the traditional holiday season. This can be an opportunity to reflect on where we are going; refresh our aims for the future and recharge our batteries for the next season in life. Sometimes this takes both curiosity and courage, but as ‘The Bright Field’, a poem by the Welsh poet and Anglican priest RS Thomas hints at, it is never too late to seize the opportunity.

This study looks at the story of Moses and the burning bush, and alongside that, the poem by RS Thomas that links this story and the parables from last week’s study.

The Passage

Ex. 3:1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” ⁵ Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶ He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Ex. 3:7 Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” ¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹² He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

The Questions

- 1) Moses was going about his everyday activity of shepherding his father in laws’ sheep when he sees something unusual and takes time to stop, turn aside and examine the strange phenomenon. (vv. 1-3). When he did, he discovered himself having an encounter with God (vv. 4-6).
 - i. What could have been the implications if, instead of turning aside, he had simply said to himself ‘That bush looks weird, but must push on and find some good grass for the sheep’?
 - ii. How easy do we find it to turn aside from the daily pattern of work to see if God is calling?
 - iii. Do we allow ourselves to follow our curiosity, to explore new things? If we don’t, what might we be missing out on?

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- 2) God calls Moses to play a leading role in the rescue of his people from slavery to a life of fullness (vv. 7-10). In the NT, Jesus similarly comes to deliver God's people from slavery to a life of fullness.
 - i. What role do you think God calls us to play in this?
- 3) What was Moses's reaction to God's call in v. 10 to go to Pharaoh? Can you identify with his response? Do we sometimes feel that we are not useful to God?
- 4) How does God reassure Moses? Do we believe that this applies to us too, does this bring us hope and encouragement to face change, to tackle new challenges?
- 5) According to Exodus 7:7 Moses was 80 years old when he first spoke to Pharaoh. Is it ever too late to consider turning aside?

Read the poem 'The Bright Field' by RS Thomas – set out below:

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

- 6) In this poem, Thomas, an Anglican priest, links the parables of the buried treasure and the pearl of great price with the story of Moses and the burning bush. The first part of the poem appears to suggest that the opportunity to obtain the treasure or the pearl had slipped away, 'forgotten', but then the writer realises the opportunity is still there to be seized – though it costs all. How easy is it to either dwell in a rose-tinted past, or hurry on unthinking to the future?
- 7) Thomas links the burning bush to the brightness 'of the eternity that awaits you'. But this brightness is found by turning aside and meeting God. Do we see meeting with God as a 'bright spot', an illumination? Or are we too obsessed with hurrying after our own desires and in danger of missing the brightness of God's presence and the buried treasure?
- 8) What practical things are you going to do this summer to 'turn aside'; to seek the buried treasure? To reflect on what God might be saying? Perhaps reading some challenging books; reflecting on the Psalms or reading a Gospel or NT book straight through; Perhaps a long walk with a good podcast, or through some beautiful landscape will help focus on reflection, refreshing and recharging.

Turning aside is worth doing and is never too late to try – God is there waiting for us.