

EXODUS 33:7-23
MEETING PLACES?

Meeting places – we have lots of them! Starbucks – other coffee places are available; or local coffee shops; do people meet in coffee shops more often than at home now? The gym – do you exercise alone or in company, part of a group of people who meet at a regular time each week. The cinema – we meet for a shared experience of watching a film, or going to the theatre or some other kind of shared enjoyment. The clock at Waterloo station in London was a traditional place where people would meet, coming from a train or going away; does the clock at Haymarket do the same thing? Night clubs – if you want to meet young adults at the weekends, then the clubs are the places to be; for a former generation it was the dancing at the Palais in Fountainbridge! Street corners are still places where people meet and sometimes if you offer them a warmer, more secure place with more to do, they'd still rather have the street corner! The foyer at school; the student union café at university or college; the open door café for parents wanting to talk to an adult rather than a 3-year old and for the 3-year olds get to meet other children to play together; the school gate is a place to meet and chat. You might have other meeting places.

The Church as a meeting place? There are people that we meet only as part of Church, people we meet on Sundays when we come here for worship; this is a place to catch up with friends that we've not seen since last week or for a few weeks. Other times and other church groups have the same function, places where we meet with one another. It is good to have this meeting place; it has that kind of social function in helping us keep in touch with one another. But Church as meeting place has more than a social impact: this is the place where we learn to encourage one another in our faith; the place where we learn to pray together and have conversations about big questions and important issues of life and what the Bible has to say about these issues and questions; and where we discover what Christian faith means in our twenty-first century world. All this begins with Church as the place where we meet together, our meeting place.

What about meeting places with God? We find that harder to define. We live in a culture that seems, on the surface, to want to push any sense of God to one side and remove any notion of God out of life altogether. But that's not the whole picture! Lots of us have a deep longing to understand what life is all about and something inside us knows, deep down, that the only way in which that makes sense is in something beyond ourselves, what the Bible and Christian tradition would describe as a kind of faith-based encounter with God or understanding of God. We're just not sure how to go about it! Equally for many people, they don't equate Church with that kind of deep spiritual encounter. Yet, when the Church meets for worship, we believe that worship is our meeting place with God; that prayer is our meeting place with God, that as we read the Bible, we encounter the living God, even if we can't see Him.

Moses and Exodus has two stories that are all about meeting-places, encounters that Moses has with God, in two very different kinds of meeting places, and these stories give us plenty to think about. There is real doubt in Moses' mind about the future. The people have just made a huge mistake: they want to have something to see to help them worship God and Moses has gone away up the mountain; they're not sure what to do next, so they ask Aaron, Moses' brother, to help them out. The result is the golden calf, which they dance round and have a party, but worryingly also describe as their god, the god who saved them out of Egypt. This is a huge mistake! It causes God to be angry and Moses to plead for mercy on their behalf. The impact of that mistake is to make Moses anxious about the future: does this mean that God will leave them and no longer go with them? There is a real anxiety that this is

something of the end of the relationship and we see something of that anxiety in the passage that we read: *"You have..." "If your..." (Exodus 33:12,15)* It is better to stay put than to travel on, if there is any sense that God has left them and they travel on alone! Moses needs to know that God is there!

The people of Israel are on a journey: they left Egypt, set free from being slaves and are on their way to the Promised Land. God being there is crucial to Moses and the people on their journey through the desert. This huge question mark hangs over their future because of their terrible mistake, hence Moses' prayer. Moses wanted something to see that would give him this assurance of God being there. God has promised: *"My presence..." (Exodus 33:14)* literally "my face will go with you" – God promises that He will be there and that He will go with them and bless them, but Moses wants something to see: *"Show me..." (Exodus 33:18)* A cleft in the rock becomes the meeting place, the place where God passes by and Moses is given to "see" something of God, His back rather than His face; His face would be too much for Moses. So a cleft in the rock on the face of a mountain becomes the place where Moses encounters God and his faith is renewed and the journey carries on.

Israel is in the process of creating another meeting place with God, called the Tabernacle. This was the great tent that they would carry with them all the way through the desert and every time they stopped and set up camp the Tabernacle would be pitched in the centre of the camp. It would have elaborate furnishings, all very carefully described in the rest of the book of Exodus and people of great skill and ability would create this tent, as we saw last week. Aaron would be the priest and the Tabernacle would be the place of worship, of offerings and sacrifices, the centre of the people's religious life and their relationship with God. The Tabernacle would remind them that God is there in their midst and every time they move on, God goes first and God is in the midst of their life. God's presence gives them courage, renews their faith, and helps them deal with difficult things. The Tabernacle becomes the meeting place with God.

There is a third meeting place: the "tent of meeting" which Moses set up outside the camp. *"Anyone..." (Exodus 33:7)* You have a question for God; you have something that bothers you and want to pray about it; you have something that troubles your mind or heart, then you go to the tent of meeting. It does what is says on the label: it is the place where you can find God. It was a regular habit for Moses to visit the tent of meeting and *"whenever..." (Exodus 33:8)* The cloud would come down over the tent as a sign of God's presence and the people would wait and watch. *"The Lord..." (Exodus 33:11)* and perhaps it was in the tent of meeting, where God speaks to Moses as His friend, that the conversation took place about the future and seeing the glory of God.

There is one other, totally different, meeting place for Moses with God – Jesus! Mark tells the story of Jesus on top of the mountain with three of His disciples. He simply describes what happens next: *"There He..." (Mark 9:2f)* To all outward appearances, most of the time, Jesus is just like any other man who walks the roads of Israel; He is able to heal sick people and still storms and feed 5000 and do all kinds of wonderful things like that, but on the outside He looks just like any other human being; there is nothing to mark Him out as different - until this one experience. His clothes become dazzling white and He is changed. Moses and Elijah appear as great figures of the past; God speaks to tell them all that Jesus is His Son whom He loves and that they should listen to Him. Here, for a moment, the curtain is pulled back and something of Jesus' real glory is revealed to this small audience of three. Jesus is the meeting place between God and humanity; in His one person, Jesus is both God's Son and a real human being. This man, who outwardly looks no different from any other, is also

the Son of God and full of divine glory. Jesus Himself is great meeting place of heaven and earth, God and the world.

Why does this matter? As human beings, we have deep, innate, desire for something beyond ourselves, which the Bible describes as the desire to know God and the need for His grace. There are times when we ignore it, or try to turn it off, but it won't go away. People say that today's young people are not interested in religion and the church, but there are stories of students wanting to know more about the Bible and faith because they want to know and need to find meaning and shape and purpose for their lives and they see answers to these questions in Christian faith. It is part of being human; it is part of Christian faith; this deep desire to encounter God, the sense of the divine and the need for grace runs through our human nature like Blackpool runs through a stick of rock!

We have four meeting places:

- We meet God anywhere, on the top of a mountain, on the shop floor, in school. God is everywhere; no matter where we go, God is already there and we can meet with God in a gap in the rocks and sense His presence, His glory and His love.
- we meet God in worship, in this place; when we meet for worship, we meet not only as group of people who want to meet one another, but God has promised to be here with us and in our singing, praying and listening, we meet with God; hopefully, we leave having a sense of encounter with the living God.
- We meet God in the regular routines of prayer and Bible reading: round the kitchen table as a family, or sitting by the side of the fire in the evening, or in bed before you sleep or first thing in the morning, as we read the Bible and pray quietly on our own, we meet with God.
- Jesus is still the most profound meeting place between us and God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus; if we want to understand God, look at Jesus; if we want to see what it means to be human, look at Jesus. Jesus is God in the world; His glory was hidden for a time and only glimpsed once, but the Church has always believed, if not completely understood how, that Jesus was that perfect combination of the divine and human, the place where God and human nature meet perfectly.

There's something about meeting places; we see how people enjoy being together and meeting and having coffee, or lunch, or shared experiences. It does us good; it's part of our relationships with other people. There is something even more profound about meeting places with God: part of our being human is this sense of needing God's grace and being blessed by God. There is something that makes us want to connect and find meaning, purpose and shape to our lives. But life is messy; we're messy people, with all kinds of faults and mistakes, with a past, and so we stay away; "God doesn't want to know me; God won't bless me, ever!" Grace is love to people who don't deserve it and grace is the way in which God meets with us, to love, to bless, to grace us with His presence. May this time, this place be for us today, a meeting place with Jesus.