

EXODUS 40
THE CLOUD AND THE GLORY

Someone walks into the room and the atmosphere changes. Now all eyes are on them; they are the centre of attention; everyone's attention is caught up with the newcomer. Maybe this is a planned visit, or maybe this is someone who has arrived unannounced. Whatever the circumstances, the room changes when this person walks in. We describe that person as having 'presence': there is something about them that has this kind of effect on other people, on the room into which they have just walked. It may have something to do with the office they hold: I'm fairly sure that the atmosphere in most rooms changes when the Queen walks in; I'm not quite so sure that many of our politicians have that kind of presence in perhaps the way they might once have had! Some church people also have that kind of presence, that the room changes for the better when they walk in and people listen, people pay attention to them in a way they might not pay attention to others. You can't create this 'presence'; you either have it or you don't; as soon as you try to create it artificially, it becomes more of a "look at me" way of life, which is not the same thing at all!

"Presence" is about being there. In our relationships with one another 'being there' works in all sorts of ways. There are people who are just "there": they may not do a great deal for us, but we know that when we need help, they are there to help us. They may not demonstrate their love and concern in many open ways, but we know that they are there if ever we need them. Equally, there are people on whom we depend a great deal: more and more people in our society depend on people who care for them, to help them with ordinary tasks such as getting dressed, cleaning the house or cooking, and their presence is essential for our health and well-being. There are people whose presence we notice only when they're not there, maybe people that we take for granted, but we only recognise their contribution to our life when they are absent.

Exodus 40 is all about the presence of God. Israel, free from slavery in Egypt, is on a journey towards the Promised Land, a journey that will take them 40 years to complete, and that goes on beyond the end of the book of Exodus. On the way so far, they have been given the 10 commandments; they have made a huge mistake in asking Aaron to make the golden calf for them to worship; they have been given all kinds of other commands from God – how to love God and how to love one another. There is more of this to come in other places! Chapter 40 is all about their relationship with God and at the centre of that relationship is the tent called the Tabernacle. There are elaborate instructions all way through the latter part of Exodus – "this is the way to make the Tabernacle" and we saw God calling some gifted and skilled people to make the Tabernacle itself, and the furniture to go inside. Then God came; God's presence came to His people in a new way, His glory filled the space. This set me thinking about the way in which we understand the presence of God in our world, in our lives. Let's see.

"Then..." (Exodus 40:1f) The Tabernacle was a tent. There was a picture on the wall of the room where I went to Sunday School, a picture of the Tabernacle, and for ages I thought that this picture was a lump of cheese! The people lived in tents; they were a people on the move and so God gave them a place of worship suitable to their life; it was a movable place, a tent. When the people stopped, the Tabernacle would be pitched in the centre of the camp, God present with His people everywhere they went, God at the centre of life! There is a list of commands about the tent itself and the furniture that would go inside, and each piece there for a reason – the Ark, the altar for sacrifices and offerings, the lights. Then there are the people who will make this work, Aaron and his sons who were to act as priests, go-betweeners,

representatives of the people in the presence of God and a system worship is based on sacrifices and offerings. “*Moses did...*” (*Exodus 40:16*) God has given instructions and Moses constructs the Lord’s house in the Lord’s way! “*So Moses...*” (*Exodus 40:33*)

It’s what happened next that is simply awesome – “*Then the...*” (*4:34*) The glory of the Lord entered the Tabernacle: what does that look like? It is an indescribable moment! Glory in the Bible is associated with light; the glory of the Lord, we assume, is something bright, a dazzling light, a light from which people hide their eyes, something almost unbearable. God is here; God is present and His glory is something for the people to see to recognise that reality. God is there; He has come to live in the Tabernacle, in a sense. God has come to live amongst His people; when the Tabernacle is pitched in the centre of the camp, God is there, right at the centre of the life of His people; their whole camp revolves around the Tabernacle as the whole of life is meant to revolve around their faith. God is there and would be there for the next 40 years till the end of their journey and later the same theme would be picked up when the Temple was built in Jerusalem; God came to live in that place, symbolic of His presence. The cloud and the glory say “God is here”.

Let’s take a slight diversion: What do our buildings say? This is not about question about whether our buildings are good or bad; this is simply a question about having a building in the community, identified as the Church. I had 2 groups of school children in the building this week, with a worksheet, not dissimilar to our reading from Exodus 40! One question we posed at the end was this: “What makes this building special?” The children felt towards the answer: “the place where people come to worship God.” What does the building say to the community? The building says “God is here!” The concrete presence of a building called ‘Church’ says that God is alive and well and living at the heart of our community.

The cloud and the glory say other things too. It is not always straightforward for Moses. “The Presence of God to cheer and to guide”? Well, yes, but... “*Moses could...*” (*Exodus 40:35*) What does the cloud and glory say? It says “God is here!” But it also says “Be careful!” Moses had to keep His distance; the glory was too much for Him. From the very beginning, Moses knew that God was special, holy; remember him taking off his shoes at the burning bush? The golden calf made the whole of Israel more aware of their sin, their faults, their mistakes; how does a flawed human being relate to a holy God? That’s what the sacrifices are for in Exodus 40; that’s what Jesus does on the cross. Moses had to keep his distance; he could not go in! Is God our buddy, our pal? Is God like some genie of the lamp who is there simply to do our bidding, available to help as and when we need? Well, actually God is King, the Lord of heaven and earth; God is holy, set apart, not like us, full of glory and majesty. The cloud and the glory says “be careful”.

The cloud and the glory says one more thing: it says “follow me!” “*In all...*” (*Exodus 40:36*) They waited for God to guide and lead and He did. When the cloud lifted, the people moved; when the cloud settled, they stopped. God guided His people all the way through their journey and not only did God guide and lead them, He went with them in all their journeys. There were to be some challenging moments, some scares, some great moments and, every step of way, on the rest of their journey of which you can read in Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua, God was there with His people, helping them, blessing them, leading them on. The people’s responsibility was simple: to follow, to go as God led them, to keep in step with God. The cloud and the glory says “follow me.”

Let's bring this on a bit. *"The word..." (John 1:14)* Literally, Jesus "tented amongst us". This is about Jesus and John says that Jesus came to our world and "tented amongst us". How connected is that to the story of Moses and the glory of God amongst His people. In Jesus, the same God came into our world in human flesh and blood and lived amongst us. This time, He comes in a different way; this time He comes as a real living person; He comes, not in the light of glory, and the cloud, but as a real human being, starting as a baby, growing to be a man, living in a community a bit like ours, amongst real people, facing the kind of situations that we face every day in life. Jesus came, God in the world! Jesus shows us God involved in the world, caring for the world, meeting the needs of the world in a very real way; God is not some "out there, up in air" God who couldn't care less; in Jesus, God is personally involved in our world and in our lives.

There is one last piece to this picture: *"Don't you..." (1 Corinthians 3:16)* "Temple" is all about the place where God is to be encountered. Here is a new slant on that: the Spirit of God lives in us; God is present in His people now by the Spirit. God is present by His Spirit amongst us when we gather for worship and so as a people of God together we are the temple and God is present amongst us. But it is more than that: God also lives in each one of us by His Spirit so that each Christian is a temple; the Spirit lives in us. This is one of the biggest secrets of Christian faith, not deliberately so, but it is something we don't talk about too much, perhaps because of the traditional language of the Spirit as 'Holy Ghost' and we're not sure of ghosts living in us and other controversial things. But here's the reality: the Spirit is given to us when we believe, and God lives in us by His Spirit. God's presence goes with us wherever we go because He lives in us.

So, here's the thing: God is with us everywhere we go and always! How do you react to that?

- It is thrilling – the thought that God is with us is a thrilling thought; the Christmas story is wonderful, not just because of the Aww! factor and the baby, but because God is with us.
- It is comforting – God is there, He is able to listen to our prayers; He is willing to be there for us, to sustain us when life is hard and to bring the resources of power, grace and love to help us, forgive us, guide and lead us.
- It is confusing – how can the same God be with all of us, everywhere all at once; but God is bigger than we know; His ways are bigger than we understand!
- It is scary – how can we rest content when God is holy and we are not? How can we be easy in the presence of such a great God as this? The answer is that we can't – not on our own, apart from Jesus; because of Jesus there is forgiveness and we are free and fear is gone.
- It is challenging – certainly, because God knows us, and knows our faults, failings and mistakes and challenges us to be different; to live in a way fitting to His presence, to be people who reflect the grace, love and holiness of God. "Follow me!" He says.

God is with us. The Tabernacle told Moses and Israel "God is here"; Jesus says "God is with us"; the Spirit says "God is in us". Love God with all your heart; follow Him; keep in step with the Spirit.