

Two mules' load of earth

Over the years I have had a variety of roles in my working life. For a number of years I edited Partners in Learning, an ecumenical all age worship and learning resource. And I remember that the account of the healing of Namaan the Syrian by the prophet Elisha was one of our favourite biblical stories – and one which we explored quite regularly. It is not difficult to see why: children and young people can certainly feel affirmed by the crucial role that the young maidservant has in the tale. Ultimately the healing of her 'master' Namaan is the result of what this young girl had said to her 'mistress'.

It is interesting to reflect: she has been seized as part of the booty of war from her own people, yet she seeks good for the man who had led the Syrian troops in the war that had led to her captivity. I think there is probably an implication in the tale that Namaan's wife had treated her kindly – almost like a daughter. One can hope so. In fact even Namaan himself comes out of the story quite well in terms of how he treats his subordinates. When after his initial refusal to listen to Elisha's recipe for a 'cure' – a wash in the Jordan – his servants point out that his hissy fit is rather self-defeating he actually takes their advice. We could imagine that other military commanders might have executed their colleagues for less.

Two mules' load of earth. It is what Namaan requests when after his cure by Elisha he promises to worship no other God but 'the Lord'. Since it is quite important for what I want to say this afternoon I will mention to you that the words 'the Lord' here represent what is in the original Hebrew text four letters which add up together to make the personal name of God, YHWH. Those two mules' load of earth will enable him to worship 'the Lord' YHWH even when he is back home in Damascus. That reference to those two mules' load of earth is actually one of the most important break-through moments in scripture. It has helped us to reach the understanding of the one and only true God that we hold today.

For me, one of the glories of the Old Testament is the way that it shows a people's faith in development, a development in which their experience of God interwove with the vicissitudes of history to lead to ever greater depth and understanding.

That developing story perhaps begins with the Exodus from Egypt when under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites escape from slavery in that land, into the freedom of the wilderness and the eventual hope of reaching a place where they could live as a free people.. The action is initiated by a divine being associated with a burning bush that Moses had encountered near Mount Horeb. This deity refers to the Israelites as 'my people' (Exodus 3.7, I have heard the cry of 'my people') so there is clearly a close association between this deity and the people of Israel. When Moses presses to know the name of the god who is speaking to him, which in the religious culture of the day was important, so that the people could 'get a handle on him', the response is mysterious. The god reveals his name as YHWH a word which seems to be linked to the Hebrew verb 'to be' and then explains it as 'I AM WHO I AM', which of course reinforces the connection with 'to be'. But it feels a mysterious sort of name, There's a song by the hymnwriter Brian Wren which catches the idea well. I read the beginning of it:

Deep in the shadows of the past,
Far out from settled lands,
Some nomads travelled with their God
Across the desert sands.
The dawn of hope for humankind
Was glimpsed by them alone—
A promise calling them ahead,
A future yet unknown.

While others bowed to changeless gods,
They met a mystery:
God with an uncompleted name,
'I am what I will be';

What Wren is suggesting is that the name of this god whom Moses meets is in some ways not a name at all. 'I am what I am' doesn't let us get a handle on the god. Doesn't really allow human beings to control him – which was part of the purpose of naming a god. Rather the god who is named YHWH refuses to become a puppet of humanity, even of a people that he refers to as 'my people', and insists on his sovereign freedom to lead them into an unknown future. Even the very sounds of the name reinforce this sense of mystery and

uncontrollability – they are all what are called semi-vowels rather than hard fixed consonants.

The encounter with this mysterious and uncontrollable God was what sowed the seeds of biblical faith.

Fast forward a couple of hundred years. Guided by their God YHWH the Israelites have entered Canaan, and found themselves living in a culture in which there were several distinct groups of people competing for territory, each group supported by its own deity. There is an extraordinary passage in the Book of Judges, when the Israelite Jephthah, fighting with the Ammonites, throws a challenge to the Ammonite king: 'Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? And should we not be the ones to possess everything that YHWH our God has conquered for our benefit?' The implication of Jephthah's words is that he bought into the idea that there was a fundamental connection between a god, a people, and a territory – but that applied to the Ammonites as much as it did to the Israelites.

Fast forward a further two hundred years or so and we arrive at the time of Namaan and Elisha and those two mules' load of earth. It is a breakthrough moment. The underlying presupposition is still that there is a deep connection between a god, a people and a territory, but the desire of Namaan, although a Syrian, to worship YHWH – back home in Syria – requires the beginning of a rethink. And so the request for those two mules' load of earth. It is as though he is setting up an embassy of YHWH in the Syrian territory which tradition dictated belonged to the god Rimmon. It's a request which feels quaint to our ears, but was radical for its time. No longer is YHWH simply just the god of one particular group, nor is he limited to one particular place. It is in fact the beginning of a process that will be worked out over the following 300 years or so of Israel's history, coming to its culmination in the time when the people had been forced far from the land into an exile in Babylon. Many were wondering then about the power of their God YHWH compared with the Babylonian gods, and also whether indeed they could sing the Lord's song in this strange land, certainly given that they had not been able to take two mules load of earth with them on their forced journey into this foreign territory. The prophets of this time wrestle with those questions and offer us the insight that this period of exile is a sign not of the weakness of the God of Israel but his power, to control the destiny, not simply of his people, but of all the peoples of the world. Compared with YHWH the gods of the Babylonians are powerless

idols of wood – non-existent in fact. YHWH is now no longer to be thought of as one competing deity among several but the Lord of the whole earth who can be worshipped anywhere. So out of the tragedy of exile comes the monotheistic vision which is offered to us in the soaring and lyrical beauty of the parts of the Book of Isaiah in which the one whom we now call God will proclaim to us,

‘I am YHWH and there is no other,

Beside me there is no god.

I form light and I create darkness

I make weal and create woe.

I YHWH do all these things.’

The uncompleted name of the deity that Moses first met in Egypt eventually leads to this vision of a God whose completion is to be found in his rule over the whole of creation.

That of course wasn't quite the end of the story, and indeed that wonderful monotheistic vision expressed in Isaiah's poetry contains its own challenges. One of which is – if God is indeed the God of all creation, all people and all time and place, what is his relationship with that particular people with whom the story began in the days of Moses, that people who, each passover tide still proclaim, ‘It was not our fathers alone that the Holy One redeemed but us also did he redeem’? Does God's compass over all creation mean that he can no longer have what the Book of Exodus calls ‘a treasured possession out of all the peoples’? What is the relationship between universality and particularity?

The Jewish and the Christian answer to this question may be different, and indeed those different answers underlie the often sad and bitter historical relationship between Judaism and Christianity. It is a question that is explored explicitly and implicitly in the New Testament including, I believe, in this week's lectionary Gospel which we have just had read. The passage is of course set during the life and ministry of Jesus. It is the second occasion when Jesus has sent out his disciples on mission. Back in the previous chapter 9, he had sent out the twelve, now it is seventy. Given the way that in the Bible the number seventy often stands for all the nations of the earth, I think it is fair to suggest that Luke is wanting us to think of this mission as potentially universal, to all peoples and nations, compared with that earlier sending out of the twelve

apostles, which had perhaps just been to Jesus' own people, the Jewish people. In a sense this mission of the seventy will foreshadow the later missions across the Mediterranean which will be the focus of the story that Luke offers us in his second volume, the Book of Acts, and which quickly began to include Gentiles as well as Jews among the hearers and receivers of the message. We see this as an important and rightful development, and so it is, but even Paul, who was responsible for so much of this work found himself wrestling with what this means for his, and Jesus', own Jewish people, especially those who were unable or unwilling to see Jesus in the light that he Paul now did. Who is now the people of God? Does it still include those of Paul's and Jesus' particular kindred according to the flesh who do not accept the claims that Christians make for Christ? Does Christianity's universality mean that there is now no role for Jewish particularity? Paul agonises over this issue for three chapters in Romans 9-11, and at the end of them throws up his hands in despair at coming to a definitive answer, and hands the problem back to God, as he concludes with the question, 'Who has known the mind of the Lord?'

It is a question that I myself have wrestled with most of my own working life, in the fields of biblical studies and more recently interreligious relations, and over the years I have become less sure that I know the answer either! I cherish the soaring universalistic vision I have shared which is offered in the Book of Isaiah, and yet I also know that for me as a Christian no less than for Jews, particularity is vital. It is important to me that Jesus lived in a particular place, at a particular time and as a member of a particular people. Indeed the fact that during this coming week I will be leading a group of young people who have been in the Diocese in Europe's internship programme on a visit to the Holy Land, is a visible statement that we Christians have long cherished this particular land, whose very physicality speaks of the way that God came to us in the flesh.

Yet as we all know only too well particularity has its challenges, both in the Middle East and elsewhere. It is fairly easy to draw a line between particularity and some dangerous forms of nationalism, and contemporary Christians are certainly not exempt from that danger.

So perhaps we need to return to the beginning of the story, of the revelation of the God with the uncompleted name, and even as Christians honour that sense of incompleteness as an invitation by God to allow ourselves to be led by the Holy

Spirit to continue to discover more about God's ways of dealing with us, cherishing the generosity of a God who stooped low enough to greet his human creation not only and fundamentally in the birth of a baby in Bethlehem, but even in the quaintness of that request centuries earlier for two mules' load of earth.