

Oxley Uniting Church 6.30pm Sunday 3 March 2019

First Reading: Exodus 34:29-35

Second Reading: Luke 9:28-43

Third Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Message: The Revolution of God

I was thinking of calling this message “The Evolution of God” but that is rather incendiary and I don’t really want to get in to the whole area of whether God is unchanging or not in spite of the many times in Exodus that he changes his mind because someone whinges at him.¹ Then I thought that maybe Evolution in the Understanding of God was more accurate anyway for what I want to say. But the more that I got into it, the more that I felt that what we see across these three readings is more like a revolution.

But there is, throughout the Old Testament, what could be interpreted as a growing understanding, a development, progress, or even evolution (if you like), in the people’s understanding of God and their relationship with him.

I’ve been re-reading the Old Testament again lately and on this time through what is really striking me is the amount of repetition and change. There is an awful lot of repetition of law throughout Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. It has often been pointed out that many of the laws that Moses handed down at Sinai would only make sense to a settled people, which the Israelites were not going to be for a couple of generations at that point.

The way that the narrative flows through Exodus is that the laws are being given for the here and now. But then we get to a verse in Leviticus² where it kind of recognises this anachronism that most laws relate to a settled people when it says:

The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and commanded him to give the following regulations to the people of Israel. When you enter the land that the LORD is giving you, you shall honor the LORD by not cultivating the land every seventh year.

Deuteronomy gives us the whole Exodus story again, this time told from Moses’s perspective and written as his last speech to the people before he dies and as the people are about to invade the promised land. Moses gives the people the laws again, elaborating on the first of the ten commandments because they are about to go into a land where they might be tempted to worship the gods of the current

¹ For example, Exodus 33, where God says he won’t go with the people into the promised land because they are a stubborn people and he might destroy them (vs 3) but then revises his decision when Moses pleads with him (vs 17).

² Leviticus 25:1-3.

occupants³. But in this account, Moses is quite upfront that the laws relate to the land that they are about to occupy. Chapter 11: 8-9:

⁸ “Obey everything that I have commanded you today. Then you will be able to cross the river and occupy the land that you are about to enter. ⁹ And you will live a long time in the rich and fertile land that the LORD promised to give your ancestors and their descendants.

and 12:1:

“Here are the laws that you are to obey as long as you live in the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. Listen to them!”

So we’ve got different versions with more nuances and different perspectives as the circumstances of the people, possibly of the writers, change over time. I would suggest that often these differences, and particularly multiple tellings of similar events in Genesis⁴, point to different accounts written in different time periods but brought together even later still into some kind of almost, but often not quite, coherent narrative. Early Genesis especially, with its different accounts of the creation, seems to have been compiled from earlier oral narratives with the idea that including multiple versions is preferential to editorial intervention.

Encounters with God also show a lot of variation and development over time. In Genesis 3:8 Adam and Eve hear God walking in the garden and try to hide themselves among the trees. This is a God with physical presence, not an omnipresent one.

Moving on, God talks to Abraham a lot. Usually it is just presented as “The Lord said to Abraham.”⁵ Sometimes it is in dreams⁶, or visions⁷, and sometimes it is in the guise of a man. In Genesis 18: 1 three men appear in front of Abraham. Verse 13 implies that one of these men is the Lord. In verse 16 Abraham walks with them as they go on their way and they stop at a place where they can see Sodom (where Abraham’s nephew lives). Then verse 22 says:

²² Then the two men left and went on toward Sodom, but the LORD remained with Abraham.

And God and Abraham go on to have the conversation about how many righteous people are enough to save Sodom. It really suggests that God is present in physical form.

³ Deuteronomy 12-13.

⁴ Abraham and Sarah Genesis 12:10-20 and 20:1-18; Isaac and Rebecca Genesis 26: 1-11.

⁵ Genesis 12:1

⁶ Genesis 15:12-21

⁷ Genesis 15:1

God talks to Moses, too. A lot. The first time is from the midst of a burning bush on Mt Sinai, the holy mountain⁸. There are three motifs in Exodus: fire, cloud, and place. God speaks from a burning bush. A pillar of fire leads the Israelites across the desert by night, and a pillar of cloud by day⁹. When Moses comes down from Sinai with the Ten Commandments the first time, God comes down too in a cloud so that the people will hear him speaking with Moses and believe Moses.¹⁰ When they move on from Sinai, the Tent of the Lord goes with them and when Moses goes in to talk to God, the cloud comes down on the tent.¹¹ So God comes to a place in fire or cloud. Initially that place is Mount Sinai, but then as they move on from there it is the tent that God commands Moses to build for him, with the cloud hovering over it during the day and the fire at night.¹² When God first enters the tent, in Exodus 40: 34, the “dazzling light of the Lord’s presence filled it.”

These people have fire and a speaking cloud leading them around, and are mostly ok with that, but it is Moses’ shiny face that really wigs them out. Why? Moses’ face is shining with the reflected glory of God. The cloud, the fire, are God moving into human space. But this is different. Moses has been into God space.

So, from Genesis to Exodus we move from an understanding of God as sometimes appearing in human form, but always associated with a particular happening at a particular place, to an understanding where God can manifest in a different kind of physical form, that is as cloud or fire, and his presence is associated with a particular space. That space can now move about as God chooses, but it is still a defined space. And there is a distinction between God appearing in human space, and some space being sacred, or God space.

By the time of Jesus, that space has settled on the Temple in Jerusalem, at least for the Jews. But when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, he tells her that a time is coming when people won’t worship on either the mountain, like the Samaritans, or in Jerusalem.¹³ He says,

²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.

²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”¹⁴

There are many things that can be said about the Transfiguration of Jesus, and many things have been said about it. The reading comes up each year about the same time, so there have been a lot of sermons on it and probably not much new that can be said.

⁸ Exodus 3:1-6.

⁹ Exodus 13:21-22.

¹⁰ Exodus 19: 9.

¹¹ Exodus 33:7-11.

¹² Exodus 40: 34-38.

¹³ John 4:21.

¹⁴ John 4:23-24.

In the Luke reading, the Transfiguration is bookended with Jesus talking about his death. This is also what he is talking about with Moses and Elijah.¹⁵ But the disciples are just not getting it. In Chapter 9: 26 he talks about coming in “his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.” The Transfiguration gives a glimpse of this. This is Jesus in God’s space, shining with the glory of God, and talking with Moses and Elijah. He is comfortable in this space and that points to him being more than human. And then the cloud appears and God speaks to the disciples telling them to listen to Jesus.¹⁶ In this way, the Transfiguration mirrors what had earlier taken place with Moses.¹⁷ And the disciples are so wiggled out that Peter starts rambling and they don’t tell anyone what had happened for some time.

Do you ever wonder how they knew it was Moses and Elijah? It’s not like they had Instagram. They were just coming out of a deep sleep. Were they dreaming? Having a vision? Does it matter? Dreams and visions are signs of the presence of God’s Spirit. Joel 2:28-29 says,

²⁸ “Afterward I will pour out my Spirit on everyone:
your sons and daughters will proclaim my message;
your old people will have dreams,
and your young people will see visions.

²⁹ At that time I will pour out my Spirit
even on servants, both men and women.

Acts 2:17 says,

‘This is what I will do in the last days, God says:
I will pour out my Spirit on everyone.
Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message;
your young men will see visions,
and your old men will have dreams.

We can easily fall into thinking that the New Covenant began with Jesus death, that it was a moment in time, a complete break. But what if the whole of Jesus’ life, from foretelling to ascension was a transition, a process, that brought about the New Covenant. Jesus himself said that he did not “come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets” . . . “but to make their teachings come true.”¹⁸

Jesus continues elements from the old testament, like the shiny face thing of the transfiguration. Like the earlier prophets, he heals the sick¹⁹ and raises the dead.²⁰ As I’ve indicated in the story of Abraham’s three visitors, the argument could be

¹⁵ Luke 9:30-31.

¹⁶ Luke 9:34-35.

¹⁷ Exodus 19: 9.

¹⁸ Matthew 5:17.

¹⁹ 2 Kings 5: 1-19 Elisha heals Naaman. Luke 4:38-41 Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law and many other people.

²⁰ 1 Kings 17:17-24 Elijah raises the widow’s son. John 11:38-44 Jesus raises Lazarus.

made that Jesus was not the first time that God walked on earth in human form.²¹ Also, the Spirit of God had come upon prophets²² and leaders²³ in the past. We are told that the Spirit stayed with David from his anointing on, but there is no sense that this was always the case with everyone.²⁴

But Jesus is different. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. This isn't God just nipping in for a quick bite with Abraham and Sarah. This is God living with us, as one of us. Instead of giving laws telling us how to live, this is God showing us how to live. When Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, it is not fleeting. He says:

⁵ "If you love me, you will obey my commandments. ¹⁶ I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever. ¹⁷ He is the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God. The world cannot receive him, because it cannot see him or know him. But you know him, because he remains with you and is^[a] in you."²⁵

Jesus brings the God space into us, inside of us, and it stays there. This is not just an evolution in human understanding of God, this is a qualitative leap in the way that God relates to his people. All of his people, not just the special leaders. We are tapped into a spiritual realm. And maybe this was why Jesus seems frustrated with his disciples when he comes down the mountain and they haven't been able to cast out the demon²⁶—after almost three years with him, they still don't seem to get that everything is different now and we're operating in a different realm.

And this, I think, is what Paul and Timothy are on about in the reading from 2 Corinthians. Wherever the Spirit is present, and that is inside of all of us, there is freedom and we should be reflecting the glory of God.²⁷ We don't need to go to a special place. We don't need shiny faces. The Spirit unveils our minds to bring understanding of God's word. He stays with us, teaching us, and making us more like Jesus. That's not just an evolution in human understanding of God, that's God working in a whole new way.

²¹ Genesis 18.

²² Micah 3:8 "But as for me, the Lord fills me with his spirit and power, and gives me a sense of justice and the courage to tell the people of Israel what their sins are." Ezekiel 11: 5 "The spirit of the Lord took control of me, and the Lord told me to give the people this message: 'People of Israel, I know what you are saying and what you are planning'."

²³ Judges 3:9-10. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel. Judges 6: 34 The Spirit of the Lord took control of Gideon. 1 Samuel 16: 13 The anointing of David: "Immediately the spirit of the Lord took control of David and was with him from that day on."

²⁴ 1 Samuel 16:13.

²⁵ John 14:15-17.

²⁶ Luke 9: 37-43.

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 3:18.