

‘I AM THAT I AM’: Speaking in Time

OT: Exodus 3: 13-15.

NT: John 8: 52-9

‘Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.’
(John 8: 58).

Tonight we begin a sermon series in which we ponder what we do not know about the God we worship. This is a very proper contemplation for finite creatures to make, since any God whose attributes and inwardness were fully known would, by definition, be one too small to be more than our own creation, rather than being -as He is - the One who creates.

On the other hand the liturgical season of Epiphany is, on the face of it, an unexpected time to start. It is the season which moves into light, the season in which God shows Himself in the person of His Son; when we come closest to knowing what we do not know; where our blindness becomes sight and our deafness understanding. And the readings we have heard are, among other things, *theophanies*, God-showings – moments when God speaks directly to His people about Himself, when He discloses something of what He is.

But these moments of disclosure are mysterious. What, or whom, is being shown, and what sense can we creatures make of it? How far is God prepared to reach towards us in order to establish anything we could understand as a relationship? a conversation? a meeting? Outside time and outside space where is the sense in speech or the place for response? The two readings, which themselves are part of an historical narrative of the acts of God in communion with His creatures, tell us something of the intentions of the God we do not fully know.

The first comes very early in the narrative of the Exodus, of the movement of God’s people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Moses, no prophet or leader at this point but a shepherd for his wife’s father, happens to be with his flock in the wild country about the slopes of Mount Horeb when he encounters a wonder: a bush burning with continual fire without being consumed. He goes out of his way (and, the implication is, onto sacred territory) in order to see more closely, and the voice of God speaks to him from the midst of the fire. This voice speaks his name first of all, ‘Moses’; then introduces the Speaker in terms of historical relationship: ‘I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ Having established connection, the voice comes to the import of the encounter: the freeing of a people, and the choice of Moses as instrument for that freedom. Moses, out of his understandable dismay, asks how he might name the God whose command he serves? He wants backup; an authority he can convey to the people which they will recognise. And it is in response to this request that God declares himself: ‘I AM THAT I AM... say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.’

What is God saying about Himself in these disclosures? In English the verb ‘to be’ is the most static of all the verbs, conferring no change of state upon its point of address, so that grammatically its sentences are said to have no ‘object’ but a

‘complement’, each side of the sentence a perfect balance for the other. If a verb were to be a fire, transforming subject into object to bring about a consequence, a movement in time, the verb ‘to be’ could only be a fire which left its subject – a bush, let us say - unconsumed in a perpetual present now. Consider then a sentence which has the declaration ‘I AM’ on both sides of it ‘I am the someone that I am’ and you encounter a statement of being which refuses bounds of any kind but which presents itself as perpetual subject, defined in a personal pronoun as *someone*, not *something*, knowing itself to be a self, but otherwise boundless. Most sentences with the verb ‘to be’ as its main verb are sentences of definition, because they cannot be sentences of action. ‘This city is Cambridge’; ‘this building is a chapel’. We name; we make bounds which allow us to imagine the shape of the thing we describe. This naming is not like that. It is all being, and personal being.

The Pentateuch – the first five books of the Old Testament – have come down to us in redacted form. Someone has put together different versions and accounts in a continuous form, splicing variants in together. So we don’t quite know at what point the one God Israel worshipped began to be given the name never to be spoken, the name of the tetragrammaton, YHWH, [sometimes spoken by Christians as ‘Yahweh’] or (owing to a trifling mistake in the sixteenth century about Hebraic vowel markings) as ‘Jehovah’. But that name is perhaps derived from the verb of being: ‘hawa’; if so, it is in a causative form and could be understood as meaning something like ‘the one who causes things to be’. Its unspeakability makes a silence at the heart of our apprehension of our Creator, which is a creature’s silence: we fear the Lord; we are in awe at the one who causes everything to be made that was or ever will be made. Much later, when there was a Temple with an innermost chamber (at this moment in Exodus we do not even have the stone tablets or the Ark of the Covenant), it would be a veiled and empty space.

‘I AM THAT I AM’ is not all that God says. On each side of this saying he gives himself another identity: as a family God, an ancestral presence: ‘The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’. This isn’t just a description: God says clearly ‘this is my name for ever’. God places his identity, his name, in the history of his dealings with his human family: in time, in space, in his own creatures: ‘this’ He says, ‘is my memorial unto all generations’. He does not only speak: he speaks in time.

If the God who spoke in Exodus is a God of time and family, a God intimately identified with human concerns, then we readily see how rightly the epiphany of God’s Son manifests in the Gospels. The logic is of ever more intimate bonds between creator and creature, until in Jesus each meets the other and nothing is ever the same again. That is where we sit in the light of eternity, contemplating the fusion of God with humanity in the self-giving of Jesus’s life, death and resurrection. A characteristic saying of Jesus in John’s Gospel is ‘*ego eimi*’; ‘It is I’; ‘I’m the one’. This is one of those moments, but its disclosure is made sharper by the apparently nonsensical change of tense: ‘πριν Αβραάμ μενεσθάν, εγώ ειμι’: ‘Before Abraham was, I am’. In this passage too the participation of God in time is stressed through genealogy: ‘Abraham is our father’ say Jesus’s interlocutors in v. 39, finding in that their claim to know authoritatively what is and what is not of God. Yet they also find quite quickly the major flaw in a purely genealogical and historical understanding of the works of God in the world: ‘Abraham...is dead’ they cry, ‘and the prophets are

dead: whom makes thou thyself?' Jesus replies in words which replace 'making yourself into something' with words of pure being; words which acknowledge time but exist apart from it: 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad...Before Abraham was, I am'. God is manifest in the world, he is saying; that great Creator has embraced his creatures by becoming creature: Rejoice.

'Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by'. We too, creatures wilfully blinded to the Godhead hidden in our midst, might use this time of epiphany to pray for the enlargement of our souls, for the unveiling of our sight to see the unconsumed and unconsuming Light.

Amen.