

Exodus 33:12-23

Matthew 22:15-22

But I cannot see him.

Introduction to the readings:

The First Testament reading is a bit hard to follow – all the he's get muddled up and knowing if it is Moses or God that is being spoken about is a bit confusing.

Notwithstanding that, Moses and God are on close enough terms for there to be a conversation going back and forward. God says he knows Moses, by name! And Moses wants to see this God who claims such familiarity - the story tells us that God is on such familiar terms with Moses that he will do what Moses asks!

But, God isn't inclined to show God's face. And this leads to Biblical scholars discouraging readers of the story from thinking of God in human form (anthropomorphic). It is suggested that Hebrew word translated "my back" (v. 23) is *achorai*, which refers not so much to something spatial or physical as to recognising that time that has passed.

God's solution to Moses request is to tell Moses "you can see 'my afterward' but not my face."

Moses (like us), can experience the effect or the power and presence of God without seeing a *being* called "God."

The parable Matthew records comes toward the end of a cluster that we have been reading, in which Jesus is attempting to teach about living God's way; coming to an awareness of what is of importance and being in-tune with that. We need to remember Jesus was a Jew and

not a Christian, and the Pharisees were trying to label him as belonging to a dissident group, perhaps the Zealots (who opposed the payment of taxes to a pagan emperor.) so this is very clever response by Jesus. Pay the tax if the coin belongs to the Emperor. This is the price per head for enjoying the rights of being a Roman subject (he wasn't trapped there). But Jesus goes on to say, more importantly, give God your very life - for that is ultimately what is of importance (he holds to his teaching).

These two readings seemed to me for most of the week to be on very different themes and I was having trouble choosing which to reflect on today. On the one hand, as with Moses, there is the desire or longing that many of us experience at one time or another for assurance that God is with us and cares about us. We want to know God, and to be reassured that all will be well, and we'd quite like proof!

On the other hand the parable seemed to open an opportunity, too good to miss in these pre-election weeks, for a sermon on taxation and Church state relationships!

It wasn't until someone said to me as we were talking this week "I know Jesus but I have never known God." that the penny dropped, and I then remembered saying at some stage in my own life that 'Jesus gets in the way of understanding God' – I know that was presumptuous of me so I can only think I must have been quite young.

What I saw, with a flash of insight, was Jesus that comes toward us from history... if that is possible... a human person we can identify with, with concrete propositions: how to behave, the priorities we need to establish for right living, relationship matters and how to manage them, how to understand community and communal

responsibility, social ethics, gender inclusivity, health and wellbeing and the priority of equity and respect, love and kindness ... things we can understand and know about... or argue with at times.

Whereas God is a big idea ... today we might even talk of virtual reality... nothing we can readily pin down, not tangible, always seeming to be different according to what you read or who you listen to. We so often want to use human language for God ...even power language or boss type language that seems to nudge us toward bigness, and a sense of awe; human but awesome too. We try to get hold of something more concrete, less nebulous.

Unlike Jesus who comes toward us and whom we can see in advance and even anticipate the significance of what we will hear, when it comes to God, it is only when it, the experience, is all over, past, that we might ask ourselves “was that the work of God, the presence of the spirit of God’s love?” or something like that when a sense of assurance overtakes us, or something unexpectedly positive and good happens.

If we do what the gospel Jesus preached and lived demands, then we must do what we can to maintain community cohesion and wellbeing – and that includes paying our taxes through which we contribute to the wellbeing of our society, as well as continuing to press for equity and a closing of the wealth/poverty gap and for protection for our most vulnerable.

If we hear Jesus’ often coded message, then we must also give our attention to understanding, and to experiencing, our lives in all their fullness (ups and downs), as lived in the presence of God. “Give to God the things that are God’s” Jesus is reported as saying.

Jesus helps us understand the two go together somehow. There is the doing and the watching; action and reflection. It is as if from time to time we have to be prepared to 'stand in the cleft of the rock' and wait for the 'afterwards' of God.

For me this is best done these days in silent meditation, in making spaces for stillness in the midst of busyness.

I'm not very good at it, so preparing for today is a good reminder. I am fortunate that every week preparing for Sunday provides a discipline in which I must make space to wait, with as much patience as I can muster. Sometimes I have more success than others as you will be aware!

So in the busyness of the world cup celebrations, the pre-election hype and our own predilection for getting on with stuff so we know we are not wasting our lives, let's as it were stand with Moses in the cleft of the rock and wait for the afterwards of God so we can celebrate the knowledge that the loving energy that is God, catches us up too. This will help us to keep our lives and choices in perspective.