

"What's in a Name?" - Ex 3:1-15; Matt 3:13-4:11

Yesterday I watched some excerpts from the Hollywood film "Sully" - the story of the US Airways pilot who averted disaster 11 years ago, landing his plane on the Hudson river after a bird strike destroyed both its engines. Earlier in the week I had been reading his book. What, you might wonder, has that got to do with today's readings? In a word, water: I will come back to it later.

Last week we left the family of Jacob in Egypt, where they had been reunited with Joseph. Instead of dying, as they thought, he had risen from obscurity as a slave to become Pharaoh's chief of staff. Now, 200 years later, a new Pharaoh was in power who felt threatened by the size the family had grown to, and had made slaves of them. But God had a plan to take them to a land where they could flourish, and where the promises he had made to their ancestors could be fulfilled.

Moses is part of that plan, but when we pick up the story in the first reading he doesn't know it. He just knows something odd is going on. A bush is on fire, but it's not being burnt up. He sees a figure in the fire, and he hears a voice calling his name: "Moses! Moses".

Names in ancient times were not just labels, they told you something vital about the person. Moses' name meant "drawn out". It had been given him by Pharaoh's daughter, rescuing him as a baby from the river Nile. The fact that whoever was speaking to him now used it meant he must know him very well. When God saw he had Moses' attention, he introduced himself with some good news: "I am the God of your ancestors... I have seen my people's misery... I am concerned about their suffering... I have come down to rescue them and bring them to a good and spacious land..." Thank you, God! thinks Moses. Then the bad news: "Now go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." Wait a minute, God! You just told me you were going to rescue them. Now you're saying I'm going to do it? - me, an 80 year old shepherd? "Who am I to do such a thing?" he asks.

"I will be with you", replies God, to reassure him. Moses is not convinced. When he goes back to the Israelites in Egypt claiming God has sent him to rescue them, they will need some persuading. So he asks for God's name; and for good measure God gives him two: "I am" and "The LORD". Why two names? To put it simply, "The LORD" is God's name; "I am" is his name's meaning. In Hebrew, they are two parts of the same verb - two sides of the same coin. Together, they tell us the all-encompassing scope of who God is: he is the eternal, uncreated, pre-existing one - creator of heaven and earth, as he is known in the scriptures; but he is also Yahweh, "the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation" - the God who will later "speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend", as we can read a few pages later in chapter 33.

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(In case you are wondering about the name, think of the hymn some of you sang two weeks ago about the God of Abraham, calling him "Jehovah, great I AM". He is the same God! "Yahweh" is the modern rendering of the four Hebrew letters which used to be spoken in English as "Jehovah".)

The reason why the name "The LORD" (in capitals) is used for God's name in many modern Bibles is because it connects us to Jesus right at the start. The Greek version of the Old Testament uses the same word to translate God's name as the New Testament writers use for Jesus. It's the Greek word "kyrios", meaning "Lord" or "master". It's a title we'll use in our confession in a few minutes, when we say "Lord, have mercy". (In Greek, you may recognise it as "Kyrie eleison".)

But the connection between Old and New works in both directions, because Jesus' name in the New Testament is the Greek form of "Joshua", which means "Yahweh saves". So it's not just the title that connects "the LORD" of the Old Testament to the Jesus of the New, it's his name as well.

Direct links like this are one of the ways the Old Testament points to Jesus. Another is similar patterns in the storyline. Lucinda gave an example of prophetic drama two weeks ago when she spoke about Abraham almost having to sacrifice Isaac. Today's Bible readings give us another example, but one with a difference.

In both our readings, water is important: Moses' name reminds us of his escape from death as a baby, being rescued from an ark on the river Nile. Later he leads the escaping Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea out of Egypt, where they had earlier fled to escape death by famine. At Jesus' baptism he passed through the waters of the Jordan, representing death: death to the old life followed by rebirth to new life in the Spirit. At his birth his parents had fled with him to Egypt to escape death at the hands of Herod's soldiers. Moses was to spend 40 years in the wilderness being tested by God and by the tribes of Israel. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tested by Satan.

But while Moses failed God's tests at the burning bush, four times refusing to believe that he could do what God asked of him, Jesus passed all Satan's tests in the wilderness. (Ironically, he did it by quoting each time from parts of a speech Moses gave to the Israelites in Deut 6.)

From the time of that first encounter, Moses was accompanied by Yahweh throughout the rest of his life. But Jesus was sent by the Spirit into the wilderness to face Satan's tests on his own. When his ordeal was finished, angels attended to him, and his Father God remained with him throughout his subsequent ministry. But again at the end, on the cross, he was on

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his own, as he called out to God "Why have you forsaken me?". Moses did not have to face Satan directly, but indirectly he was always present: the name "Satan" means "accuser", and Moses was accused both by his own shame and by the Israelites endlessly during their time in the wilderness.

As I said earlier, the time came when God used to talk to Moses in his tent, as a friend. That is what God wants for all of us, as Jesus showed when he called his disciples his friends, and as Psalm 25 puts it: "the friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him".

I opened by reminding you about the 155 people who came through a near death experience on water 11 years ago. Though the press called it a miracle, the captain of the aircraft attributes their survival to two things: experience built up over decades of commitment to doing a good job; and teamwork - pilot and co-pilot, cabin crew, and all the craft that came to their aid on the river.

Moses could not do what God called him to do on his own. He already had experience - 40 years as a prince of Egypt and 40 years' familiarity with the desert as a shepherd. But he needed to become part of God's team by learning to trust him - learning not to fail when the Accuser challenged him; learning not to doubt, as Adam and Eve, and all the characters we have heard about since, did; resisting temptation every day. Think back to his encounter at the burning bush. He saw the Angel of the Lord, he heard the voice of God, he took off his sandals and hid his face because he was on holy ground. He was 80 years old and had been hiding for 40 years after killing an Egyptian and running away to the desert. As we start our 40 days of Lent, let's ponder on where we stand before God, in the knowledge that, though we approach him on holy ground, he is the God who wants to know us as his friend. Let us learn from Moses, today and as we hear more about him in the coming weeks.