

It's with God... or nothing

Exodus 33 - Part 2

We had Zoe's fifth birthday party a couple of weeks' back. And, being a 5 year old's party, we played musical bumps (I'd love to see that for more 45 year old birthday parties, by the way - I think it could be interesting to see how many rounds you can go before you can't get up again...)

Well, the contestants were tumbling out of the competition (with surprisingly few tears about it, which was nice), and there were three left in it - including Zoe and her best friend Rosa. 'The Greatest Showman' was paused once again... and this time, Rosa was slowest to hit the deck. So I called 'Rosa, you're out.' She went quietly.

But then Zoe calmly walked up to me and said, 'Daddy, if Rosa's out then I'm out too' and off she went to sit next to her friend. She'd forfeited the final, leaving someone else to win by default. But as far as Zoe was concerned, there was no point in carrying on without Rosa.

We looked at Exodus 33 a couple of weeks ago. And we were challenged to think about how much the presence of God actually matters to us, as it did to Moses and to God's people in the Sinai desert. We're looking again at the chapter to see how, for Moses, there was no point in carrying on without God. And there was no point carrying on without the people God had given him to look after.

First of all, we see that for Moses, there's no point in carrying on without God. His presence matters to Moses, above all else. We looked at this last time I preached on this chapter. I asked whether you would be content to have the things that God has promised - forgiveness and eternal life - without having God Himself. And I asked that because, at the start of Exodus 33, that's the experience that Israel has been told it will have - they'll get the promised land, but God will not be with them.

When we read the way that Moses prays in his conversation with God in vv. 12-23, we see Moses turn that on its head. Have a look at v.15. 'If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here...' Moses is saying to God, 'If you're not with us in the promised land, you can keep it! I don't want to be there! If you're not present, God, there's no point going.'

And come the end of Moses' life, this is what actually happens - in the final chapters of Deuteronomy, you can read about it - God meets with Moses on

the mountain, shows him the promised land, and tells him that he's not going to enter it.

Now, Moses had spent forty years with one mission - lead God's people out of slavery and towards the promised land. And in the end, he has to hear the hard news that he isn't going to be the one to take them there. God *shows* him what's coming that he isn't going to be a part of - which, the more I've thought about it, seems a bit like adding insult to injury, a bit rubbing-it-in-Moses-face.

But when you read those final chapters of Deuteronomy, you don't hear Moses pleading for God to think again. You read of him being with God, faithfully ministering to His people, and singing blessings over them. Whereas, here in Exodus 33, you *do* read about Moses pleading with God to do things differently. Why's that?

It's because what God's talking about in Exodus 33 matters more to him. When God says 'you can have the promised land but you can't have me,' Moses prays and pleads and will not drop it on into chapter 34 - 'I'm not going anywhere without your presence, God!' It's the thing he's most stubborn about.

When God says at the close of Moses' life, 'you can have me, but you can't have the promised land,' Moses is still, content, peaceful, worshipful. He has God, and that's all he wants for his whole living existence. In vv.18-23, when Moses asks to see God's glory, it's because He wants to be as close to God as he possibly can. To Moses, there's no point in going anywhere apart from God, and there's nothing better than getting as close as he can to God.

And Moses isn't the only one. Paul writes in Philippians 3 that everything's a load of rubbish compared to the 'surpassing greatness of *knowing* Christ Jesus my Lord.' And here's what Jesus Himself says as He has an intimate conversation with His Father in John 17:3, in the shadow of the cross He's about to go to... 'Now this is eternal life: that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.'

Do you see what Jesus is saying? Eternal life *is* knowing God! That scenario I gave you a couple of weeks ago - the idea that you could have the promised eternal life in a perfect re-created world, but without the presence of God - it's a contradiction in terms. There is no true life; there is no eternal life; without the presence of God.

What Moses thirsts for - being with God, and seeing His glory - is what Jesus says life is, and what Jesus wants to give to us. It's what He went to the cross for. Jesus died *so that* we could be forgiven and have life forever... and we often stop there, when the sentence should actually continue... *so that* we can always, always be in the presence of God, right now, and forever!

To be in the presence of God is the infinitely fuller life that Jesus brings. There's no point going anywhere in life if we're leaving that behind.

*What things are you more stubborn about than being in God's presence?
How might you change that?*

~

So, Moses isn't going anywhere without God's being present to him. But he's also not going anywhere without God being present to *them*. The people God has given him to lead and love. The people his life is bound up with.

In vv.12-13, Moses is itching to know God better - but also passionate about God remembering His people. God's reply in v.14 is this: 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' In the Hebrew, that 'you' is singular. God is saying, 'I told the Israelites that I'm not going with them. But you, Moses, because I am pleased with you and I know you in this close relationship, I will stay with you.'

Great, right? That's everything I've just been telling you Moses wanted - the presence of God, nothing else mattered to him. But for Moses, it's no deal. Have a look again at v.15. 'If your Presence does not go with *us*, do not send us up from here.' Moses isn't going anywhere without the people God has given him. He is so invested in *their* lives, *their* fate, *their* walk with God, that he would sacrifice himself and his own destiny for them.

If you think that's putting it strongly, flick back to Exodus 32. Just after Moses discovers how God's people went off the rails and worshipped a golden calf, he prays this in vv.31-32 - 'Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin - but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.'

That's how far a truly godly leader identifies with the people God has given them - to pray and plead and tie themselves together like that. We hear Paul speak like this too, in Romans 9-11, when he's writing about his own people had rejected faith in Jesus. In Romans 9:3 Paul says, 'For I could wish that I

myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.'

And of course, this is what God Himself does in Jesus Christ. God, who does not need us to enjoy perfect relationship, which He already enjoys in Himself - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - God so loved and identified with us that in Jesus, He died on a cross, to be cut off so that we, the people He loved who belong to Him, would not be. Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, God tore Himself apart to make sure you weren't torn away from His presence.

Here's something else that Jesus said in John 17, in v.24: 'Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.'

He knew when he prayed with that heartfelt desire that the way to have what He asked was to die on a cross for it to happen. But do you hear Jesus' heart in that? He *wants* what it brings - us with Him, in His presence.

Back to Exodus, and in the chapter after the one we read, chapter 34, we read Moses praying *again* for Israel in vv.8-9: 'Moses bowed to the ground and worshipped. "O Lord, if I have found favour in your eyes," he said, "then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance."

Being God's inheritance is something we thought about when we looked at Ephesians not long ago. The idea that God's love for us is so great, that He sees us as treasure. Through faith in Jesus, He adopts us as children in His family, lavishes us with love and security and eternity and identity, and He delights in us as *treasure*.

We can tend to think about that very individualistically, because we're 21st century westerners. 'I'm God's treasure!' But that's not what Ephesians says, a letter that's so much about being a people of God *together*. And it's not an idea Moses was content with either. He wanted God to take the people of Israel *together*, faults and all, as His treasure, His inheritance. And both in Exodus 33 and 34, we see God respond, 'I will do just that.'

So this is why, when God showed Moses the promised land that he himself would not enter, it wasn't a kick in the teeth, but a genuine gift to Moses. He got to behold the land that the people he loved were going to receive. He could get excited for them, picture them there, pray them into it.

There's an individualistic way of knowing God that we get sucked into. 'As long as I'm okay with God, that's okay...' 'I *want* other people to know Jesus too, but that's up to them, all that's on me is whether I know Him and worship Him.'

That's not how Moses thought. Not how Paul thought. Not how Jesus thought. There were people they were a part of that they lived out and prayed away their lives for. Now, I'm not trying to load the weight of the world on your shoulders, because that's how some of you will take this. But I want to ask the question, who has God given you as people to identify with like this?

Who are you to lead, or love, or share life with, whose destiny and whose having the presence of God with them matter to you as much as having God present in your own life? It could be your spouse or kids. It could be some people you know well and see lots of. It could be some young people. It could be some old people. It could be... and I pray this becomes more and more true for more and more of us, including me - *this church!*

Whose faith and fate with God matters as much to you as your own? Are your prayers for them as full-blooded as Moses, Paul and Jesus?

Just as Zoe told me, 'I'm not carrying on the game if Rosa's out,' Moses told God, 'I'm not moving a foot unless I know you're coming, and unless I know it's with *us*, not just me.' What might God be saying to us as a church through that?

Last year, when I shared with you this pretty long term vision of where God is leading us as a church, it was with this trajectory:

Increase in God's presence... take the land... watch out for false gods when you get there...

A lot of that came from God speaking to me really clearly in a couple of the chapters of Exodus. It's Exodus 23 through which God has spoken to me clearly time and again, a very important chapter for Heather and I personally and for us as a church. From that I got that God was saying we had to increase in some way, before we 'take the land' and step into all God has to unfold, following which we need to guard against false gods - whether success or comfort or whatever we'll find.

But I didn't know what the increase was about, and for quite a while I asked God how I, or how we, were supposed to 'increase'? It was when I read Exodus 33, and especially read a book called *Dirty Glory* by Pete Greig commenting on this chapter, that God's Spirit gave me that penny dropping moment - 'You need to increase in God's presence.'

I spoke to you in this year's vision talk a few weeks back about what God's telling us about where we are in the journey now. We're not quite at 'taking the land' yet. We've got this message of 'get ready. Summer is coming, but it's Spring just now. It's time to get ready for what's about to bloom; it's time to consecrate yourselves - to set yourselves apart to God, to deal with the stuff that needs healed, to suit up with the armour of God...'

And we're not done with the 'increasing in God's presence' bit. Far from it. Indeed, it's by all of us increasing in God's presence that we'll get ready, that we'll set ourselves apart to Him, that we'll heal up and we'll suit up.

What I'm learning as we look at Exodus 33 together here is this: That it matters to me as much that you know the presence of God as that I do. That it matters to you as much that I know the presence of God as you do. That we so love God, and so love one another, that desiring the presence of God *with us all* matters more than anything, and it's what we're most stubborn about.

We're not moving anywhere - not into a new building, not into dozens of people coming to faith in Jesus, not into new programmes or activities - before *together* we increase in the presence of God, and we covet that for ourselves and one another above everything else.