

In the wilderness: Acts 7.35-53

Today's TFTD from Robin

How about a quick quiz? Jesus or Moses?

1. When I was an infant my life was endangered by those who would do me harm. Jesus or Moses?
2. God sent me as a leader to my people but they rejected me. Jesus or Moses?
3. I went up a mountain and God spoke to me. Jesus or Moses?
4. I urged my people to turn to God and worship him alone. Jesus or Moses?
5. I gave my people commandments from God. Jesus or Moses?

I expect you get the picture by now. In many instances Jesus followed the pattern set by Moses.

The martyr Stephen, in his final speech before his death, draws this parallel between Moses and Jesus and, in particular, he draws a parallel between the way the people of Israel failed to listen to Moses and Jerusalem's rejection of Jesus.

As we reflect on the parallels between Moses and Jesus one might think that Jesus was very clever to mirror the story of Moses in his own life and ministry. Or one might think that Moses was unconsciously pointing the way to the one who would come after him.

I prefer to think that the account we have of the life of Moses and the accounts we have of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ have many parallels because they reflect accurately the human condition and humanity's relationship with God. The stories are similar because they are about the same thing; God and us.

As we try and understand where we are in these stories, we inevitably come to the conclusion that we have strayed; we have worshipped idols and not the true God; we have not followed God's commandments; and yet God still reaches out to us and if we are prepared to reflect deeply enough and change our ways we can still return to him.

That is Stephen's message to his executioners. They can still make the effort and turn to God because God has reached out to them through Jesus Christ.

Stephen tells his hearers that, in order to turn to God, they must abandon the ritual of temple worship and, instead open themselves up to the Holy Spirit of God. The temple in Jerusalem is a man-made cul-de-sac. It is an obstacle in the relationship between God and humanity.

Stephen says this:

'Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness, as God directed when he spoke to Moses, ordering him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. Our ancestors in turn

brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors. And it was there until the time of David, who found favour with God and asked that he might find a dwelling-place for the house of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands.'(Acts 7:44-48a)

Every time I leave my house my view is dominated by our lovely church with its wonderful spire; made by human hands. Normally this building is the focus of my life. Of, course the last few weeks have been very different. We have all had to improvise new rhythms of life and new rhythms of worship. We have all had to re-calibrate and deepen our relationships with our neighbours.

The virus is a very bad thing. It has brought tragedy to many and fear and hardship to many more. We are indeed in the wilderness.

But in the wilderness, it seems to me, we have found deeper and better ways of worshipping God. I wonder if we are worshipping God more closely to the way God intends us to do now that we are exiled from our lovely building, made by human hands, than when we were in it? And, if this is correct, what will this mean for our worship when our period in the wilderness ends? And for the way we live our lives?

Here is a prayer for our time in the wilderness.

Loving God;

Direct our worship as we wander through the wilderness

so that we may worship you in spirit and in truth,

in the prayers we say, the thoughts we think and the actions we do.

Grant to us a safe homecoming so that we can gather as your church once again,

renewed by your Spirit

and ready to follow your commandments.

Amen.