**Exodus 33:12-23**

**Holding on to God in the dark struggles of life**

When it comes to the Christian faith, we would all like certainties, wouldn’t we? That is especially true when we are going through difficult times in life; when we have a relationship that is failing, or when we are facing ill health or when we lose someone we love, or our job becomes uncertain…Certainty in faith would be wonderful.

And we look around us, we look at the other people who are sitting in church today and we might inwardly feel very jealous or a bit inadequate. We might be thinking, “I bet I’m just about the only one here today whose faith isn’t sorted; the only one who is riven with doubts, the only one who feels despairing”. We might look around us and think that everyone is sorted – except for yourself. Don’t think it’s any different being a Vicar! I too look around me at others sitting here and think to myself, “If only I could be a Christian like *that*. If only I had as much faith or wisdom or gentleness of spirit as that person…”The truth is, we are all in the same boat, really…

I doubt that there is anyone here today who thinks they are completely sorted in the faith.

I know that many of us, me included, find the Christian faith a real struggle - and are sorely tried during the most difficult times in our lives. Certainty in faith would be wonderful. But it isn’t the experience that most of us have, unfortunately…

Instead, most of us struggle in a sort of in-between place: we know God is real, and we know the Christian faith is true but the experience of our lives means that, often, we are left clinging on by our fingertips instead of living in that deep down joy and confidence that we think is the common experience of everyone else.

Do I have an answer to the problem today? No, I don’t.

But what I can say is that this sense of struggle, this lack of certainty, is the common experience of every saint through history. It is the common experience of every major character in Scripture, and even our Lord Jesus Christ himself on the Cross when he said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Hard as it may be for us to comprehend - but the place of struggle is the normative Christian experience and what we must try to do is somehow find our peace in that place rather than constantly battling to escape it.

Our reading from Exodus this morning is a testimony to this truth. Let’s recap the story – it’s on page 85 in the first half of the pew Bibles.

We are joining Moses at the beginning of his ministry. He had received the call of God on his life to go to Egypt and set the people free. But he was still absolutely riven with doubt and was struggling with his calling. Verse 12: “Moses said to the Lord, ‘See, you have said to me, “Bring up this people”; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.”

Poor Moses was in a place that many of us find ourselves: he was facing a future that looked incredibly difficult and he didn’t feel like he had enough facts to face it with confidence. Moses was frightened for the future and he was asking God to fill in the gaps for him so he could face the future with less fear and more confidence…

And then Moses embarks on the same sort of bargaining that we all do at one time or another, verse 13: “Now if I have found favour in your sight, so that I may know you…”

Well, I don’t know about you, but there have been times in my past, times of real darkness in my life when I have bargained with God in this way…“Lord, if you heal this person I love, I promise I will be a better Christian…” “Lord, if you let me get this job, I promise you that I will pray for an hour every day…” “Lord, if you promise that no-one will find out what I’ve done, I promise that I will be faithful to you every day until I die…” Bargaining with God when we are facing difficulties in life is perfectly natural: it’s what we do. It’s certainly what I have done in the past.

And sometimes, we might even go a step further and sort of try to spiritually blackmail God by calling his character into question: “God, I thought you were a healer? How can you possibly let that person die?” “God, I thought you loved everyone? How can you let my relative suffer so much?” Calling God’s character into question in a desperate attempt to get him to do what you want him to do…

Well, we are not alone when we do this – because Moses did the same thing, verse 13 again – “Consider too that this nation is your people.” Here he is questioning God and trying to shame him into seeing things Moses’ way.

Bargaining with God in times of difficulty. Questioning God’s character in times of difficulty. Perhaps we feel guilty when we behave like that – but I don’t think we need to. It is a perfectly natural way to behave. And if even Moses did that, then perhaps it is understandable that we, weak as we are, will fall into the same pattern of behaviour…

And what is God’s response when Moses behaves like that? Does he get angry? Does he tell Moses to grow up? Does he accuse Moses of being weak in faith and too childish?

No.

God meets that type of questioning with compassion and kindness in verse 14: ‘God said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest”.’

Moses’ words of fear and doubt and vulnerability were met by God’s words of kindness and compassion and love.

And there is a deep intimacy in this from God. In verse 17, he says, “I know you by name”. Names are very important things. My name is Steve. If you call me Stephen, I immediately think I am in trouble. Jeremy is called Jeremy. If I started calling him Jezza, it wouldn’t reflect who he is or the nature of our relationship. Our daughter is called Rebekah. But me and Jo are the only people who call her that; we are her parents and all her friends know her as Bex. But I could never begin calling her Bex: to me, she will always be Rebekah.

Names are important – they make a statement of who we are and they define relationships.

So when God says to Moses, “I know you by name”, he is making a profoundly deep statement about knowing Moses’ every need, every fear, every doubt, every vulnerability - and he is also making a statement about the relationship he has with Moses: he knows Moses – he knows him intimately and despite the circumstances of Moses life, he can rest easy in that.

The same is true for us too, of course. When we struggle, when we face dark times, we come to God and we want answers, we want certainties. But that is not the first thing that God offers to us. Instead, he offers us something far more profound, something far deeper; something much more long lasting. As with Moses, he says, “My presence with go with you, and I will give you rest. I know you by name.”

It may not feel like it for you right now, but God is with you. God promises you rest and God knows your deepest need and he is with you all the way…

The experience of Moses is the same experience open to us today…

So, that’s all very well – but it may sound a little trite, I guess. I know the sufferings that many of you are going through. I know the dark places that many of you are inhabiting right now - and it seems a bit shallow of me to just say, “Don’t worry – God is with you, he will give you rest, he understands…” Quite rightly, you would get pretty frustrated at me if that was the best I had to offer. You might know it’s true – but you want more…and why not? Moses wanted more too: he wasn’t quite satisfied with God’s answer here, so in verse 18, he pushes God further: “Show me your glory, I pray”

Ah, now we can relate to Moses even more, can’t we? I’ve done it – perhaps you do it too: “God, if you won’t change my situation just yet, just give me a sign that you are there: anything will do: send an angel to visit me, or a purple cloud across the sky or put a rainbow above my house: something – anything – just a sign so that I know I am not going mad down here!”

Have you ever done that? I know I have, many times!!

Well, isn’t that what Moses is doing here in verse 18? “Show me your glory, I pray.” He wants a sign – he wants something tangible to prove God’s promises are true. Surely that’s not too much to ask…

But God’s response is even more enigmatic in verse 20: “But you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live”

Is that the great Get-Out Clause of God? He makes promises to us that he will be with us - but he won’t let us actually see him or physically experience him! How frustrating it is! How damn annoying it is!!

So we just have to go on trusting God’s word. But sometimes we are left wondering if we are making it all up; as if this Christianity business is just pie in the sky wishful thinking: a nice story to get us through the tough times in life.

Well, if we were to leave the story here, that may well be the case - but that isn’t the end of the story. Because, whilst God doesn’t make it implicit here, there is something that he says which gives us a chink of light in our darkness. OK, it doesn’t wipe our problems out, it doesn’t take all our problems away. But maybe it gives us just enough to hold on a little longer and keep trusting in God that the future really does contain hope.

What am I talking about?

There is one phrase used twice in verse 22 that leads us to a better place of understanding: “While my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have past by.”

Twice in this verse, God uses the idea of him ‘passing by’ Moses.

And then, even more clearly in verse 23: “Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back”.

Now it seems to me that God is teaching us a very important principle here for when we are struggling in life, which is this:

We cannot see God when he is here, but we will recognise him when he has passed by. We cannot see the face of God, but we can see his back.

The truth is, when we are in a dark time in our lives, we may not be able to see God - but we can only ever know him by his past deeds, by his past acts. We can know God’s faithfulness to us in the present day as we learn to look back on our lives and think through how he has always been faithful to us in the past. We can be sure that God will not leave us alone now as we learn to look back on our lives and think through how he never deserted us before when we were in times of difficulty.

We may not be able to see God today: but we remember his love and faithfulness from when he passed by before.

We may not be able to feel God today: but we remember his compassion and kindness as we see his back in our past.

For me, this is an intensely important spiritual principle here: when we are in times of darkness, struggling with faith, or health, or grief, or loss, or fear, we may want to have God’s glory revealed to us in the here and now and we become frustrated when that glory is not revealed. So look back: consider your life, consider your past and realise afresh that your personal history is one in which God has never left you alone, he has never deserted you, he has never been unfaithful to you. And if that is true of your past, it can give you hope in your present troubles - because God never changes. As he was to you then, so shall he be to you now and in the future.

God says to each one of us: “My presence with go with you, and I will give you rest. I know you by name.” And whilst your present experience may not mean that you can *feel* that, your history is proof of the fact that God’s promise is true and so you can trust his word for today and tomorrow.

During your present struggles, God will put you in a cleft in the rock and will cover you with his hand and his glory is closer than you may think - even if you can’t hear it, or see it, or feel it.

This is not wishful thinking. This is not pie in the sky. This is truth that has been testified to throughout your history, throughout all history.

So I have no magic words today to take away any pain you may feel, if that is where you are at today. But I will signpost you to a God who protects you and covers you with his hand, a God who promises to be present with you in your pain, a God who knows you by name. And someday soon, when you have passed through your current struggles, you will be able to testify again with real joy in your heart about the God who has passed by this day and, in a way that you have not been able to comprehend, has given you the strength to endure.

God says, “My presence will go with you and I will give you rest”.

Even if you can’t feel that today, it is truth. And it will be enough for you today, and tomorrow and every day, until the storm passes you by…