

Exodus 19
Meeting with God: scary glory

Yet in Christ approach with boldness

Jenny and I chuckled this week, listening to the early morning news. A woman had just used the word “literally” in an entirely nonsensical way. People in **Wales**, she informed us, had *literally* been locked into their homes over the last few months of Coronavirus restrictions.

My mind flew immediately to that old Ronnie Barker sitcom **Porridge**, each episode of which, you might remember, starts with the sights and sounds of numerous doors being clanged shut, locked and bolted. That poor woman on national television did not really mean that someone was coming around each night and *literally* locking people into their homes even if she used the word.

More and more, people nowadays don’t mean “literally” when they use the word. I’ve wondered for years about when we say that some event was “heart-stopping”. Is that meant to be taken *literally*? Or even when we say, “My heart skipped a beat”. Really? But there’s one incident from way back that makes me take that question seriously.

It was near the end of my first term at university. I had managed to get into the university musical society chorus, and we were at the stage of the final rehearsal for the performance which was going to be held in **King’s College Chapel** in a few days’ time. We had been rehearsing elsewhere in the town for a couple of months, led from a superb grand piano, extremely well played - I think the guy who played it went on to be the organist at St Paul’s Cathedral. But we obviously needed to get a few hours of practice in with the full orchestra that was needed.

We were performing Elgar’s **Dream of Gerontius**. It’s written from a Catholic perspective, and that might give you a few quibbles, but it is absolutely wonderful music. The storyline, if that’s what you’d call it, is of a person who has recently died, and their progress - over about an hour of music - to meet with God. It’s really very sad how the piece closes, though, as the person pictured as a believer has to be taken away again to the supposed sort-of sleep of purgatory, but that’s the Catholic *misunderstanding*, I’d say.

Before that, though, you get to that moment when the soul actually meets God - the “Beatific Vision”, I think the term is - literally, “the sight which blesses”. And that was when my particular “heart-stopping moment” - literal or otherwise - occurred.

You get to that point in the piece, and obviously the music is going to rise in dramatic intensity. It gets louder and louder. The chords take on a definite edge of *discord*. The pace quickens. The heavy-duty brass instruments start to sound dark and threatening.

It’s actually a very similar feel, in my mind, to what we have just read in Exodus 19. Darkness, lightning, all that other stuff.

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.

(Exodus 19:16)

But back to **King's**, and the first time that I had heard this with the full orchestra going full-tilt, instead of merely the piano accompaniment. The various trumpet - or maybe trombone - blasts are echoing back and forth across the width of the building. And the moment comes when Elgar portrays the soul finally meeting with Almighty God.

There is first a split-second of silence, as if the whole of the orchestra and chorus held their collective breath. And then there was an immense wallop on the biggest, deepest **drum** fractionally preceding one tumultuous orchestral chord. The sub-harmonics of the drum are too low to hear, but you somehow just feel them instead. And it felt as if I could hear the reverberations of that dramatic chord and drum beat travelling the length of King's Chapel and then back up again from the far wall.

I think it's the only time in my life I really do seriously wonder about that "heart-stopping" possibility. It must have been at least "skipping a beat". Or maybe it's just that our perception of time stretches at highly unusual moments like that - that is another possibility.

But what Edward Elgar put into his music at that point seems to me to capture something amazingly well. We can become all too complacent about the idea of "meeting God". Of course Jesus has told his disciples that we enter into a new relationship with God of the highest privilege:

Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name..."

(Matthew 6:9)

And yes, we do have to hold onto this wonderful truth. He is not just Almighty God, but our Heavenly Father. But we can emphasise this to the extent that we start treating him like our heavenly *mate* or pal. And that takes things too far. Even in the NT we have a verse like this:

... let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

(Hebrews 12:28-29)

Now that comes after a passage that points back directly to our passage today in Exodus 19, when **Moses and the Israelites prepare for the fearsome prospect of meeting with God**. But although that's where we're headed right now, we'll end up back in Hebrews before we close, because that's not the full story. There is a *New* covenant now, and ...

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet ...

(Hebrews 12:18-19)

Before we finish - and before we break bread together - we will read on to what we have come to instead:

But you have come to ...

(Hebrews 12:22)

And the pinnacle of those insteads comes a couple of verses later:

... and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, ...

(Hebrews 12:24)

But we need, first, the dark backdrop of Mount Sinai, in order to see just how much better this mediator of a *new* covenant is.

So, as we pick the story up, the Israelites are now three months away from Egypt.

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.

(Exodus 19:1)

Now that's not quite desert, but "wilderness" is certainly not a particularly lush kind of terrain. We could think more like "steppes" or "plains", rather than full-on desert - but don't think of *flat* open spaces.

They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ...

(Exodus 19:2)

But, with apologies to **M&S adverts**, this is not just "any old mountain". It's one that was significant to Moses because of something earlier in Exodus.

[God] said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

(Exodus 3:12)

Just stop and think for a moment about

- **When God's promises puzzle us**

What were the Israelites supposed to expect when they left Egypt? I can't imagine that 40 years in the wilderness would feature highly in their hopes, can you? Weren't there promises from God?

"... I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey."

(Exodus 3:17)

And does it sometimes seem to you that there are things that the Bible seems to say we can expect from God ... but things just don't work out as we hoped or expected? Promises of healing, perhaps ... but I, or that person I'm praying for, don't seem to be recovering? Promises of strength ... but I still feel weak?

Folks, we need to have a memory like Moses here. We need to think back and maybe even search our memories deeply, to find out if there is something *else* that God has also said, and that is relevant here.

Yes, there is that promise of "a land flowing with milk and honey". Yes, you're right, this daily manna, miraculous though it is, *isn't* milk and honey. But yes, there is also that promise about *this mountain*. Something significant is going to happen here.

So Moses, though it seems you are not at all very far, yet, on the road to that land of promise, it doesn't mean to say that you have lost God's path for you. Here's one thing extra to factor into your thinking: **what else?**

And there's another thing we could usefully train ourselves to remember, too. That God's promises in the Bible don't all that often feature a specific timing. It could well be that we want to bring forward into the Now things that God has lined up for us further in the future. Sometimes we will say that we are so excited about things that we **just can't wait**. But honestly, that is all we *can* do, at times. Because God has something else for you to do right now.

So, when you're **puzzled by God's promises**, two things you might do well to ask yourselves: remember to ask yourself **what else** God has said on the matter, and to ask yourself whether you aren't wanting to write in a **when** that God never included.

So, back in the wilderness, with, I'm guessing, only that implied invitation ...

There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God.

(Exodus 19:2-3)

And God answers. With a finger pointing back to those momentous events of recent memory:

The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

(Exodus 19:3-4)

Perhaps something for Moses to remember, when things get scary later on the chapter. The people had accused him of bringing them out of Egypt in order to kill them with thirst in the wilderness ... which was just obvious nonsense. Well, would *God* exert himself so greatly to bring this nation to this place only to zap them here when the darkness and thunder and lightning starts up? No, on the contrary, God has designs for wonderful, unprecedented blessings for them!

“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

(Exodus 19:5-6)

And yet though this is a special privilege, it's not meant to imply that God's blessings would only be limited to them - even if it looks that way at first. Remember way back to God's initial promise to Abraham:

“... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

(Genesis 12:3)

Singling out the Israelites is how this is going to be accomplished.

“... you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

(Exodus 19:6)

If they were going to be a blessing to others, they needed themselves to be a **nation**, not a mere collection of twelve tribes. It's going to take gracious rulership: there will need to be a **king** for this kingdom. If they are going to bring the other nations to God, well, that's the role of **priests**. And if they are going to bring God to the other nations, they will need themselves to be **holy**.

- **When we become introverted**

It really is so very easy for us, too, to become too self-centred and inward-looking. Lockdown for us as a church is all about keeping *us* going in our faith. The next few months are about getting *us* comfortably back into *our* building. Folks, where does the *them* feature in all of this? When these verses are picked up in the NT, see the explicit purpose that Peter adds on at the end:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

(1 Peter 2:9)

Of course it's important that we should meet with God, through Jesus Christ. But where does *them out there* meeting with God, through Jesus Christ, feature in our thinking and feeling?

So Moses relays these words to the national leaders.

So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him.

(Exodus 19:7)

And I think we are to presume that there was at least a little discussion of these words, to judge by how the next verse is phrased:

All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD.
(Exodus 19:8)

And then we get further instructions for Moses ... or possibly forewarnings of what to expect shortly. Even *with* the warnings, it's going to be alarming enough!

And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever."
(Exodus 19:9)

"Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people."
(Exodus 19:10-11)

That's got to be ... umm ... exciting, surely! Something to look forward to? Or ... if we think that way, does that mean that we are already starting to lose track of the awesome majesty of Almighty God? There was that thing from the Narnia stories, where it was probably Lucy who asked if this **Aslan** character was safe to be around. The answer, if I remember right, was "not safe ... but he's good".

By the end of this chapter, nobody is going to be thinking that this God is *safe* to be around. That mistake will no longer be possible. You can almost start to hear the tension crackle from the words of the account alone. And it's more than just the need for some ceremonial washing of clothes. An area is to be marked off as **dangerous**.

"And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.'"
(Exodus 19:12-13)

It is as if there is some kind of contagion so lethal that you don't dare get at all close even to kill the infected victims. Distance weapons are needed. Folks, remember those early days of Lockdown, and the strangely elaborate ways we tried to seriously **keep our distances** from one another, walking out into the road - well, the roads were ridiculously empty a year ago - rather than risk getting within that deadly zone of proximity.

But there will be a summons to the edge of that area of danger, for this needs to be witnessed clearly.

"When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain."
(Exodus 19:13)

And then the day for all of this to happen dawns.

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.

(Exodus 19:16)

You can almost feel that with them, can't you? But it's time.

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

(Exodus 19:17)

But no, it's not just their knees knocking together. The ground is shaking beneath their feet, too.

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

(Exodus 19:18)

Of course it has been suggested that this was merely a volcano, witnessed by ignorant savages. But volcanoes don't speak. Yes, "answered" here might not be words; there might be a bit of poetry in the way the next bit is phrased, but there are going to be plenty of words in the next few chapters of Exodus!

And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

(Exodus 19:19)

But only now we get to the climax of all of this. Moses himself, by the way, is not cool, calm and collected in the midst of this. Even if it's not recorded in Exodus

Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

(Hebrews 12:21)

And no wonder!

The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

(Exodus 19:20)

And first of all, Moses is told to make sure that the people down below *stay* down below. If it's all as scary as it reads to me, I think I'm with Moses, reckoning that there's only so far that curiosity will take people, whereas *this* is so clearly such manifest lethal danger. Who's going to jump over any cordon and take *this* kind of risk?

Folks, what comes next in this account is the giving of the Covenant to the people of Israel. When Moses has returned from warning the people to keep their distance a final time, we get these famous words at the start of the next chapter:

And God spoke all these words, saying, ...

(Exodus 20:1)

That's what we call the Ten Commandments, and we'll be coming back to them in quite some detail in future weeks. And the NT insists that all of this stuff we've been reading about this morning is glorious. But to be honest, it is a strange kind of glory, what I've called this morning a **scary glory**. And so it's described, I would say, rather oddly in the NT:

... the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory

...

(2 Corinthians 3:7)

... there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, ...

(2 Corinthians 3:9)

And when you stop to think about it, something absolutely stellar and awesome is happening:

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, ...

(Exodus 19:17)

But awe is definitely the word. Awe and *trembling*. Unbearably scary as well as awesomely glorious.

... a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.

(Hebrews 12:18-19)

This is like one of the earlier times the apostle Peter met Jesus, and was overwhelmed by just a relatively simple miracle:

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

(Luke 5:8)

And sadly that seems to be as far as Elgar's and John Henry Newman's Catholicism can take them. After that moment when Gerontius is depicted as seeing God, he cries out

*Take me away, and in the lowest deep
There let me be*

...

There will I sing my sad perpetual strain

Until the morn
...
There will I sing my absent Lord and love
...
Take me away,
That sooner I may rise and go above

But that isn't the Bible's take on it. You don't find purgatory there. It's the invention, I have to guess, of people who found the Bible's promise of *bold and confident* meeting with God too much to believe. But that is what the NT promises us. Yes, there was a covenant, a set of promises, between God and the people of Israel, described to us in the OT, initiated with *scary* glory. But there is a *new and better* covenant now, that makes that cloud and darkness obsolete. Not that it is any less glorious, though; the NT insists it is *more* glorious.

For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it.
(2 Corinthians 3:9-10)

For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, ...
(2 Corinthians 3:11-12)

And if we want to see what has really made all the difference, we must end up back at Hebrews again, that book that has as its theme the whole way through the fact that things under the *New Covenant* are better in every way. So it's a book of contrasts. We're reminded - if we're Jews - or told - if we're Gentiles - how it *was*. And then we're shown how it *is*, with Jesus on the scene. And everything is better.

So we look back at the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai, trembling in their boots - or possibly sandals. But it is like the older series of **Millionaire**, when Chris Tarrant would whip the cheque (remember cheques?) out of the contestant's hand and say, *But we don't want to give you that!* Because, if you answer the next question, there is more and better on offer.

And *God* doesn't want to give you now those dark and fearful slopes of Mount Sinai. Instead, there is a better mountain, a better company, a better covenant, and a better salvation - a full and complete Saviour, in fact. The set of laws to keep in order to earn your salvation was never going to work ... but now we have Jesus, who *did* keep all those laws in total perfection, and whose righteousness can become ours. God can only bar *us* from his heaven if he could bar *Jesus* from his heaven. So ...

... you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.

(Hebrews 12:18-19)

For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”

(Hebrews 12:20-21)

No, we don't want to give you that again. Instead of that scary glory, let's now read on to remind ourselves about the bright and inviting welcome of ...

... the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

(2 Corinthians 4:6)

No, not the dark of Mount Sinai, lit only by those eruptions of lightning. Instead, try picturing this:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ...

(Hebrews 12:22)

... and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ...

(Hebrews 12:23)

... and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

(Hebrews 12:24)

That's the blood that we will be remembering in just a few minutes' time. See the contrast there, too, with the blood of Abel, murdered by his older brother, Cain. Blood crying out for repayment, vengeance:

And the LORD said [to Cain], “What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.”

(Genesis 4:10)

Whereas the blood of Jesus was poured out freely, and is accompanied by two different cries:

And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

(Luke 23:34)

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” ...

(John 19:30)

So on that cross it is *Jesus* in darkness, as the sun refuses to shine. It is Jesus who has approached the mountain, and has been struck down. He enters the scene, praying for forgiveness for his enemies, his slayers And he concludes the scene by loudly declaring that our sins have been paid for. A *far* better word than the blood of Abel.

Folks, we have to apply this truth to the most fundamental facet of our lives: our relationship to the God who is our maker, and the maker of all things. The God who is almighty and eternal and all-seeing and three-times-holy. How can we not tremble with the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai, faced with the prospect of meeting with this God?

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, ...

(Exodus 19:17)

It can't be by our frantic scurrying around trying to keep laws that penetrate to our core and only show us our sin - but do not lift a finger to help us keep them. We do not need Law to save us, but the grace of God. And we *have* the grace of God, in personal form, in Jesus.

For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

(John 1:16-17)

... Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

(Ephesians 3:11-12)

And therefore - a final word of encouragement from Hebrews. Not just that first time for salvation, but every day for life ...

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

(Hebrews 4:16)

Let you then ... with confidence ...

Yet in Christ approach with boldness