Sermon:- J Hudson Taylor, Moses and Jesus. Ready to respond

Exodus 3: 1-17 and Matthew 26:36 - 46

Weeks ago I was looking forward to joining you at Stowe Church this Sunday and worship with you but this is now sadly impossible. The sermon subject this week is about Jesus, Moses and Hudson Taylor and the way through prayer and listening they and we are made ready to respond and serve.

Can you imagine life as a length of string, not defined as a time line, but as a measure of an individual’s movement towards goodness/holiness at one end or towards evil and depravity at the other? So if we think about our three men where do they sit on this imaginary string? Jesus clearly and sits at its good end. Moses and Taylor are, I think, like most of us. We slip and slide along the string; sometimes feeling and moving to be close the God and at other times being influenced by the world around us and going in the opposite direction.

Forrest Gump in the film of the same name said while sitting on a park bench said: “My mama always said “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.” Our God is a god of surprises and we never know what we will get.

The two ‘mortals’ we consider today, Moses and Taylor, experienced challenges that influenced how they behaved and how they responded to God. Though his parents were exiles Jewish slaves, Moses was brought up from childhood in the Egyptian court. He had a privileged but pagan upbringing but remained close to his Jewish origins and was taught by his mother and sister to know God – like any other Jew in that situation. There is no indication that he was particularly close to God but he had a strong sense of identity with his fellow Jews and killed an Egyptian to protect them. He fled to exile, became a shepherd and had time to reflect on life and everything. Our reading tells us about God’s call to him by grabbing his attention and appeared as a burning bush. There is no indication that Moses was looking for God’s revelation – rather the opposite. His reported curiosity at a bush that was on fire but not consumed was a natural reaction. His reaction to this amazing phenomenon was like you or me, he was spiritually awakened to hear God’s voice and respond. The rest, as we know, is history.

What can we learn from Moses experience with the burning bush? Firstly that wherever we are, whatever situation we find ourselves encountering, however we feel – close to God or distant, God has a plan for us and for his people and one way or another will enable his will to be known and done by giving the necessary gifts. St Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us that every gift given by God is not just for the benefit of the individual, more significantly it is for the benefit of the fellowship, the community. It’s necessary, of course for the individual to recognise God’s call and to accept it and to do it. If you read the chapters that follow in Exodus you can see that Moses was full of doubts but accepted and, with Aaron, became the team that made the end of the Jewish exile possible.

We are not alone. We will be given what is necessary.

Our second ‘normal’ man is Hudson Taylor (born 1832) who was a faithful dedicated missionary who travelled to China and for 50 years of prayerful, sacrificial work with others set up a great missionary enterprise and converted millions of Chinese. The book I have telling the story of Hudson Taylor (actual first name was James) runs to 367 pages so if we took one a day we could finish in a year. That’s rather too long so I want to focus, not on his amazing missionary work, but on his teenage years and how he came to accept his calling. His father ran a chemist shop in Barnsley, Yorkshire, and the family lived above the shop. Both father and mother were very devout Christians and had high hopes for their son. The family worshipped daily together at home and attended the local Methodist church on Sundays. Hudson experienced what we might call the normal teenage rebellion against the beliefs and lifestyles of his parents. When he was 15 his father arranged a job as a clerk in a local bank so he could learn about accounts and help in the family shop. But Hudson went into an environment where Christian values and beliefs were challenged, mocked and dismissed. He faced arguments he could not counter. His faith weakened and he became unhappy with the tension between home and work. He tried to make himself become a Christian but failed. He developed an eye infection that prevented him from continuing at the bank and worked at home. He was very unhappy. His father was puzzled; his mother guessed at the problem but said nothing.

One free afternoon Hudson was alone pulled out a gospel tract from his father’s library and started to read. At the same time his mother was visiting her sister 50 miles away and , having a free afternoon, decided to go to her room, pray for her son’s faith and determined to not emerge until she was sure he believed. Back at Barnsley Hudson read the tract and was struck by the verse that said that Jesus died for our sins and as He died cried out “It is finished”. He pondered what was finished; unknowingly he prayed and became aware of his own failures and sins. He suddenly realised he needed and could accept Jesus’ forgiveness without effort by himself, fell onto his knees and recognised Jesus as his Lord, Saviour and Master. At the same time his mother knew. When she returned home Hudson greeted her and told her he had good news. “I know,” she said to his amazement. The family rejoiced. Later he found that his sister had also been praying for him. How could he resist?

It’s a story that seems too good to be true but it is true. More than that, it has lessons for us. We can be assured of the effectiveness of prayer, especially for our family and friends. God listens and his Spirit works – not with a crowbar but with gentle persuasion.

Lastly we come to Jesus and his willingness to respond. What a decision he faced with the weight of expectation and responsibility on his shoulders. The challenge between running away or accepting his father’s plan and its implications for his personal being was massive. I feel for the pressures that are being placed on our politicians and senior scientists at this time as they take decisions that have huge implications. I would be more comfortable if I knew they took the same approach as Jesus. He spent time praying in the garden called Gethsemane. He deliberately put all his cards on the table and was open and honest about the tension he felt and used the special relationship he enjoyed with his father and after hours of prayer was willing to listen and to accept the implications of the right decision. The fact that Jesus was effectively alone in this decision making process made it much more difficult. Hudson had his family praying for him – though he didn’t know it. Moses faced some tough times but was given help. Jesus was alone and by the grace his Father gave him was enabled to take the right decision – right for the fate of humanity including us.

None of us has had to or will have to take decisions as grave as Jesus (I hope). What he decided was the most important decision anyone had ever taken. We will never take right decisions unless our sense of our place in God’s world, and our responsibility to consider others coincides with God’s. Like Jesus we need the company and support of friends and family to help us through life’s tough times. In my lifetime this has not been so apparent as now with the total lock-down we are experiencing. If we are to be ready to respond to God’s will for us we have to be tuned in by His Holy Spirit who, we are promised, will guide and support us, and correct us when we get things wrong.

Pray for safety for our family and friends, pray for wisdom and grace for our leaders and for the Church to emerge from this situation stronger and more faithful. Amen