Moses in the wilderness       Exodus 3, 1-14 and 4, 1-5, 10-17

The theme for this series of sermons is the wilderness, real or metaphorical. In the Bible the wilderness is an uninhabited place, (except for wild animals,) and  usually uncultivated. It could be used for pasture so it was not always a dry and arid desert. For Moses the desert of Midian was a real wilderness but in his forty years there it probably became a metaphorical wilderness too. How did a prince in Egypt come to be living in a wilderness? Moses had fled to the land of Midian to escape justice. He had killed an Egyptian whom he saw mistreating one of his fellow Hebrews.  For 400 years the Hebrews had lived in Egypt after Joseph had brought them there to escape the famine in Canaan. They had settled and prospered. Their numbers had increased so much that the Egyptians feared their power and enslaved them to build pyramids and palaces. Moses, however, was brought up as an Egyptian prince by the princess who had found him in a basket in the river. When he grew up, the Bible tells us, he went out to visit his people, the Hebrews, and saw how they were forced to do hard labour.  He saw an Egyptian kill a Hebrew and, when he thought no-one was looking, he killed the Egyptian.  The next day he tried to intervene in a quarrel between two Hebrews and they taunted him with the Egyptian's murder. Moses did not wait for the king's anger to punish him but fled to the land of Midian hundreds of miles away, by the Red Sea.. There, by a kindness shown to the girls drawing water at a well, he was welcomed by the  priest Jethro and given the job of looking after his flocks of sheep and goats.  It cannot have been a very demanding task. It must have given Moses lots of time to think. Did he think of his mother and father, sister and brother? Did he look back at his privileged life at the Egyptian court? Did he feel he had abandoned his people? Did he remember their suffering? Did he regret his hasty blow? What did he think about for 40 years in the wilderness?

One day as he led the flocks toward Mount Sinai he saw a strange sight, a bush that burned but did not burn up.  Intrigued, he went closer but  a voice halted him. "Take off your sandals because you are standing on holy ground.  I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."  Moses covered his face because he was afraid to look at God. We can only imagine what Moses' feelings were.  God had been with him all the time, he had not been abandoned, he was still one of God's people. His long solitude had been interrupted by God and God had a purpose for his life. He was to confront the king of Egypt and ask him to release the Hebrews to travel three days into the desert to offer sacrifices. Moses was appalled at the thought of this meeting but God promised that He would be with him and create the circumstances to force the king to consent. Moses doubted the Hebrews would accept him as a leader but God revealed His Name: "Tell them The One who is I AM has sent me to you" and gave him a  stick which became a snake to prove he had a divine mission. Still Moses prevaricated; he said he was a poor speaker, slow and hesitant. God told him to enrol his brother Aaron to speak the words that God would give Moses.

Moses was reluctant to lead, to undertake God's commission to rescue God's people from slavery. He objected at every turn but God patiently solved every problem  though even God grew short with Moses' excuses. Perhaps Moses lacked self-confidence and self-esteem after all those years in the wilderness. God was not concerned with Moses' abilities but his obedience. Moses had to trust God, that his hesitations would wither as he followed God's directions and His promise to be with him in all the testing times ahead.

Moses took with him a fresher and deeper understanding of God's nature. God had been with him all the time and found him far away from his own people just as He had been with Hagar whom Abram had banished to the desert to appease Sarai's jealousy (Genesis 16, 16-15.) Like Francis Thompson in "The Hound of Heaven"  who tried to flee from God "down the nights and down the days/ I fled Him down the arches of the years" God's love and care followed him until he found God's rest, so Moses found he could not evade God.

The story of the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt is well known. Moses and Aaron formed a partnership to carry out God's instructions. There was another 40 years of wandering in a different wilderness, a more nomadic existence, with its hazards and challenges, its mutinies and its successes but this time Moses was aware of God's presence all the way.

During these last months we may have felt we were living in a wilderness, somewhere strange where the usual landmarks have moved and we are having to adapt to a different pace. Has it been a time of introspection? Of evaluating our purpose in life? Of measuring our achievements and failures?  Has it been a time of recuperation? Of meditation, an opportunity to make resolutions, to re-set our plans? The wilderness might be a real and pleasant place, a garden, the coast, or a walk through daffodils such as Wordsworth experienced. It might be the frightening desolate place of the ancient mariner: "All, all, alone, alone on the wide, wide sea." Wherever our wilderness is, and for whatever reason, refuge, retreat, exile, meditation, remember Jesus' promise, "I will be with you always, to the end of the age." It is a time to dedicate ourselves to God's service and to find in Jesus the friend we need. In Exodus 33,11 we learn that "the Lord would speak wit

h Moses face to face, just as someone speaks with a friend."  I am sure that is what Jesus wants of us, to talk to him of our hopes and fears, about all aspects of our life, to listen for his guidance, to lean on His strength, for He is our Saviour and our friend.