

The Reverend Geoffrey Howard

Exodus 33.12-end

Ps. 99

1 Thessalonians 1.1-10

Matthew 22.15-22

The advocates of Narrative Theology claim that it is the medium of the story, rather than that of proposition, dogma, creed and so on which gives the greatest insight into religious truth. This attracts me for two reasons: first, it will not have escaped your notice that I don't so much preach sermons as tell stories; and secondly, I am in good company in doing so. Biblical writers made great use of stories to express their faith. Our Lord himself was no mean story-teller.

Some biblical stories are rooted in historical events, others are fiction, and there are many in between. Jonah may well have been a Hebrew prophet and Ninevah was certainly an ancient city, but having used these two historical launching pads the writer soars into the realms of imagination. I am not suggesting that such stories are untruthful, rather they express religious truth in an accessible, vivid, and memorable way. When we come to a biblical story often the best question to ask is not, *Is it historical?* but rather, *What truth was the writer trying to express?*

So we come to the two stories we have heard this morning.

Here is the one from the Old Testament which I have rewritten with the help of a modern translation: Moses was a friend of God and like most of God's friends he wanted to get a grip on him. He was already on speaking terms with God, he spoke with God as friends do, face to face, which - although it is an impossible exaggeration - does suggest he and God were very close. God knew Moses through and through and Moses wanted to know God in the same way even though he already knew God sufficiently well to argue with him. *Look*, he said to God, *you tell me, "Lead this people," and you promise to send someone with me to assist me, but you don't let me know whom you are going to send with me. You tell me, "I know you well and you are special to me." If I am so special to you let me in on your plans. That way, I will continue to be special to you. And don't forget this is your people, your responsibility.* And so it goes on, Moses constantly pushing his luck, trying to make God Almighty change his mind. And, having succeeded, having got all he asks for, he asks for more, he pleads, *Show me your glory* - Let me see you as clearly as you see me.

This is something that cannot be given even to the most special friends of God. God tells Moses that no-one can see his face and live. I wonder why? Have you ever tried looking directly at the sun? It's a dangerous experiment. It is so blazing bright that to look on it directly without protection is to risk losing your sight. If gazing on a tiny, tiny part of God's creation can do that think what gazing on the One who has brought it and billions of other stars into existence could do. Yet God loved Moses and wanted to answer his prayer so he put Moses in a safe place, a cleft in a great rock from where Moses could see him pass by. God flashed past. It must have happened in a split second, so fast that Moses never saw God's face, he only caught a glimpse of God's back. That was the nearest this great man ever got to getting a grip on God. And that's nearer than most friends of God have ever got.

The story from the Gospel is about the **enemies** of Jesus trying to get a grip on him. The Pharisees were feeling sore. Jesus had given them a trouncing, three trouncings in fact - three parables from each of which they had emerged bruised and battered.

His enemies went on the attack, they had a plan to *entangle* Jesus; *entangle* is a hunting term, and they devised an ingenious trap. None of us enjoy paying taxes - no better vote-getter than a promise to reduce taxation, as long as someone else suffers. Few have detested it more than the Jews of our Lord's day. They hated being taxed by Rome. Most objectionable of all was that the coins with which they paid their taxes bore the image of their oppressor, Caesar. Had not Moses delivered to the nation, inscribed on a tablet of stone, the commandment to avoid graven images? Images

smacked of idolatry, and now they had to use coins which broke one of God's fundamental laws. So when they handed Jesus a coin inscribed with Caesar's head his enemies were handing him that with which he would destroy himself. *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?* A seemingly harmless question, but really a loaded one. If Jesus said it was lawful then he would be allying himself with the oppressors of the Jews; if he said it was unlawful he would be guilty of treason against Rome. They had him, so they thought, across a barrel.

They had short memories. These were the same people who had tried to entrap him with the woman taken in adultery, the same people who slunk away covered in shame when Jesus said, *Let him that is without sin cast the first stone*. They had not learned their lesson. Jesus, who had slipped through their fingers many times, was now well and truly in their net, or so they thought. Better if they had tried to clutch running water in their fists, or bottle up the wind, or put a ray of sunshine into their pockets.

*Show me a coin*, he said. And they scrabbled around in their purses to give him the hated coin which they were now only too delighted to handle.

His words, *Render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God*, destroyed them. Again they slunk back into the darkness from which they had emerged.

I would love to get a grip on God. I'd love to stand here some Sunday morning and tell you, *I've seen God's face? I've seen the glory of the Lord*. I would love to be able to say to you that I've got a grip on Jesus, that I have him all tied up and neatly packaged.

I can't, and neither can anyone else, not any Archbishop, not any Pope, not the most persuasive evangelist who has ever performed in front of a TV camera. Neither can you put God into a box labelled creed, dogma, or any other religious formula. God eludes all our attempts to capture him in a net of words. *How can I sing that majesty which angels do admire?* I can't. All our words must be preceded by, *Now we see through a glass darkly*. What our two stories tell us is that, although we may touch him, and we may use words to point to him, we can never grasp him. His enemies can't and his friends can't. Beware of those who speak as if they had him all wrapped up, they haven't. At the very best even the holiest men and women, even the greatest theologians, touch but the hem of his garment, these are but the fringes of his ways.