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### **Worshipping on the Mountain** (Exodus 32: 1-15)

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It wasn't supposed to be like this. When Moses turned aside to see that bush burning, when he was sent on his outrageous mission to lead Israel out of slavery, when he protested mightily at his unfitness for the task – what did God say? 'I will be with you. And this is the sign for you that I Myself have sent you. When you bring the people out from Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain' (3: 12). Well, they're on the mountain all right – but the people are worshipping the wrong gods. And the real God has had enough. Which means that rather than God 'being with' Moses, Moses finds himself standing alone between the Lord's 'flaring wrath' and his stiff-necked, hopelessly inconstant people. How has it come to this?

You'll remember from last week that, after days of elaborate preparation, Moses has gone up the mountain by himself to receive the words God wills to speak. Not only the well-known 'ten words' that form the basis of all the law, but a lengthy further corpus of regulations. The people then agree to obey all that the Lord has spoken, and a covenant is made between them and God, ratified as Moses splashes the blood of the sacrificial bulls over the altar and the assembly of Israel (24: 5-8). Moses is then bidden back up the mountain to receive the stone tablets and further teaching and commandments written by the Lord (24: 12). Six days Moses waits, and on the seventh the Lord calls out to him and he enters 'within the cloud' where God is, and is 'on the mountain forty days and forty nights' (24: 18).

Now, during all this time, as those of us reading Exodus know, Moses is receiving six chapters worth of elaborate instruction concerning the architecture, interior design and priestly practice to be undertaken in the Tabernacle in which God has said he wants

to dwell amidst the people (25:8). From the point of view of those left down below, however, Moses' absence must have seemed interminable. In fact, says Robert Alter, 'it is understandable that after forty days they should wonder whether [he] would ever return, and that they should be terrified at the idea of being stranded in the wilderness without the leader on whom they had been entirely dependent'.<sup>1</sup> Finally, it seems, they could stand no longer the vacuum created by Moses' 'lagging in coming down the mountain' and they demanded of Aaron that he supply them with a replacement guide: 'Rise up, make us gods that will go before us, for this man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him' (32: 1-2).

At first glance, the idea that the people of Israel might be reassured by a statue made of their own jewelry melted down seems highly implausible. But, their demand is not quite as irrational as it seems. Alter notes that the golden calf was conceived not as divine in itself but as 'the terrestrial throne or platform for the deity'.<sup>2</sup> It was, in this sense, like the mercy seat – the empty space above the Ark of the covenant where, in Israel's iconography, God was imagined to sit. Golden bulls or calves were, apparently, often used in a similar way as 'cultic seats for deities in the ancient near East' – so the problem of idolatry in the story is not that the Israelites suddenly start to worship a golden statue, but that they're invoking the effective presence of other deities: '*These are your gods, O Israel [they proclaim], who brought you up from the land of Egypt*'. Aaron, meanwhile, is trying to have it both ways – giving the people what they want while implying that the deity seated on the calf might still be the Lord. So, as the text puts it, he built an altar before it, and said 'Tomorrow is a festival to the Lord'. (32: 5).

The 'real' Lord, unsurprisingly, is not deceived. He tells Moses, 'Quick, go down, for *your* people that I brought up from Egypt has acted ruinously'. Enraged, Yahweh says he now wills to 'put an end to them' and to make of Moses alone 'a great nation'. But

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter (trans. and commentary), *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2004), p.493.

<sup>2</sup> Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, p.494.

Moses, who has mediated the covenant between God and the people, will not abandon his station as go-between. And the account of his intercession is beautiful. First, it's said, 'he implored the presence of the Lord *his* God' – God remains God for Moses, and he entreats God's presence – an act of considerable courage in the light of the story's emphasis on the near fatal pyrotechnics that attend it. Then he refuses God's disowning of Israel. Where the Lord has told Moses to go down to '*your* people', Moses' reply is straight back at you: 'Why, O Lord, should your wrath flare against *Your* people that *You* brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a strong hand?' (32:11)

Finally, he tells God some home truths. He points out that the destruction of Israel will give Egypt reason to doubt Yahweh's goodness and will compromise Yahweh's own integrity, since 'You swore by Yourself' to make of the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob a great nation. Moses recalls God to the truth of God's self and the promise of Israel's becoming, and so creates the possibility of repentance and recommitment on both sides. And when Moses sees that God has relented, he turns – another beautiful image of mediation – and comes down the mountain to the people, carrying with him the two tablets of the Covenant 'written on both their sides' (32: 15). Of course, there's considerable fall-out to come, but essentially the relationship between God and Israel is saved. Moses – the reluctant agent of God's liberating purpose – has stepped into his authority, indeed his priesthood. Which makes me wonder, could it be that *this* is the fulfilment of the sign for which Moses asked at the beginning, the sign that God promised him? 'When you bring the people out from Egypt, *you* shall worship God on this mountain'.

Well, much about this story is archaic and profoundly foreign to us: a volatile God imagined in 'frankly human terms',<sup>3</sup> a people desperate to worship more or less any available deity, and a world in which blood sacrifice is deemed efficacious in sealing relationships and directing the course of events. This is not, to put it mildly, our view of

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<sup>3</sup> Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, p.495.

things. But some essentials still ring true. How tempting it is to fill the vacuum when we're left uncertain, without clear direction, for example – how the overpowering need to grasp hold of something, anything, to reassure us leads almost inevitably to false security and false living. How real leadership is not about pandering to the immediate fears of a community, but standing for the truth of who we are and are called to become. And how being faithful to God means learning to be whole-heartedly, courageously present to the Presence despite the risk that life may never again be the same.

And here's what strikes me as most profoundly significant of all. We see in this episode how, in the course of his long journey, Moses has become someone capable of mediating the difficult and almost overwhelming call of the living God to a people distracted by what is less than God and obsessed with their own security. He's become capable of offering *his* life to enable them to be related to the true source of *their* life and so hold open for them the possibility of authentic human being. In the narrative of Exodus, Israel's vision of God has not yet been pruned of violence – and so Moses' intercession is conceived in terms of turning away God's wrath. But take away that archaic element – and what we're left with is someone daring to stand *with* God *for* the fuller life of the people in the face of their rejection and neglect. That was Jesus' priestly mission too – and through him, I believe, it is now ours.

We are entering Holy Week – the week the church celebrates a new Passover, a new passage from slavery to freedom. And we're invited to be with Jesus – the new Moses – as he mediates the unkillable love of God to a world distracted and yet in desperate need. Let us pray this week for the grace to be, with him, faithful and present, so to join our lives to the mystery of redemption unfolding at the heart of creation.