



Exodus 3:1-6

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THINGS YOU DON'T SEE EVERY DAY

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So there we are, things you don't see every day. I must say it was a bit heavy on aircraft but I thought of unusual things that I'd come across recently. You may think that an acrobatic aircraft is not unusual because they are at most air shows, but the one shown was the Alenia C27 Spartan military cargo plane which is about the size of a Boeing 737. No you don't see that every day! The other plane is the Harrier which crashed into the sea at the Lowestoft Airshow a few years ago much to the surprise of the bathers! Now you don't see that every day either – or any more for that matter.

JAPAN EARTHQUAKE Unusual things catch our eyes don't they? Many of us have the ability to capture them too these days. In last weeks Japan earthquake, many of the shots taken were by people with their camera phones – may of them running for their life at the time! It was remarkable that at a time when telephone lines were down that people still had access to the mobile internet and these pictures came up rapidly after the main quake.

BURNING BUSH Moses was looking after his father-in-law's sheep and was looking for pasture in Sinai. He'd been based in Midian for 40 years after murdering an Egyptian. He was 80 years of age and I guess not expecting to have an encounter with God. Then he saw something you don't see every day – a bush that was burning but not getting burned up. Weird. He'd seen plenty of bush fires before but this one was different. It was a surprise, unexpected. We're told why it was a surprise to him: THE ANGEL of the LORD appeared to him as a flame coming from the middle of a bush. Remember that all the word "angel" means is "messenger" - in this case the angel's job was to ignite this particular bush to attract Moses' attention. That was the message – something to attract his attention.

It did - he goes to have a closer look. *When the LORD saw that Moses was coming closer, he called to him from the middle of the bush and said, "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Yes, here I am."* The angel ignites the bush, but the voice of God comes to Moses from the bush.

THEOPHANY You'll remember last week that Jacob wrestled God. It's an example of a theophany, where God appeared to Jacob in human form. Here, God is more tangible than human. Moses can see the brightness of the flame and hear God's voice. God is tangible to him, but not in the same human form as Jacob had. Different experience, same God.

Experiencing God – different to everyone, but the same Saviour. Don't know Jesus – God is peeking your interest – what will you do?

HOLY GROUND What did God have to say to Moses? *When the LORD saw that Moses was coming closer, he called to him from the middle of the bush and said, "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Yes, here I am." VERSE God said, "Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground."*

WHAT IS HOLY GROUND? So what was so holy about the place. We know Moses was at Sinai and that it was the holy mountain. Was it that? If we look elsewhere in the Bible we find that the same thing happened to Joshua (Joshua 5:15) where he met "the commander of the Lord's armies." Another theophany. Where did this take place? He was "near Jericho": a place that never had a reputation as a holy place – quite the opposite!

Then there was the holy of holies in the tabernacle and later in the temple which was so holy that only one designated person could enter it. What did these places have in common?

WHERE GOD IS PRESENT God was present. It was His presence that made it holy. What's holy you may ask? We often confuse holiness with righteousness and purity, but actually all it means is "set apart, distinctive, different". God is a holy God. He's set apart – that's why Moses could only approach to a point. He's different because He's righteous and pure. Different. And Moses needed to respect and understand that difference.

IT IS A SPECIAL PLACE Isn't God present everywhere? True, but these were special places where God did business with people and His presence was tangible in some way or other. Now of course holy places have been around as long as man has. One of the biggest problems in the days of Israel is that people celebrated holy places, for example, Bethel where Jacob had his vision of the stairway to heaven. But God had ordained that the only holy place in those years was to be at Jerusalem. Why? Because it is the presence of God that makes a place holy.

Christians have done much the same over the years. Some consecrate buildings as holy, some build shrines where people have had encounters with God. Even in Baptist circles, we call our main worship area "the sanctuary" - holy place. The designation of places as holy then require people to dress a certain way, or act in a certain way because the place is holy. Are buildings or places holy? What does the Bible say?

WHAT IS HOLY GROUND LIKE? As Christians, is there such a thing as "holy ground". The experience of Moses, and Joshua is that it wasn't the real estate that was important, but that God had decided that He was going to be there. What made the ground holy on that day Moses saw the burning bush was that God was present on that day and on that time. Once the meeting was over, the place reverted to being a piece of scrubland with a bush that may or may have been more than a little singed!

Holy ground is where God is present. Before we think that the idea is irrelevant, then consider this verse: *VERSE Matt 18: 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.* Never underestimate the importance of meeting together as God's people. I've come across so many people who say they are Christians but can't see the need of church. When the disciples of Jesus Christ meet together Jesus is present. We have come together to worship this morning. We know that God is present. And if God is present, then we are standing on holy ground.

But there's more. Prior to Jesus, the Jews worshipped in the Temple. God was present there. It was a genuine piece of holy ground. It's gone. Why? Because God chose His presence to be amongst people.

VERSE 1 Peter 2:4 As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-- 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

God is present in His temple. We are that temple and our worship goes on within it. When we are offering spiritual sacrifices to God – worshipping Him, we are standing on holy ground because we are the temple and He's present!

We have come to worship this morning as God's people. We're on holy ground because God is always present where His people come together to worship Him. Never think that coming to church to worship is an optional extra or a miss-able event and it doesn't matter if we do something else. It's a holy place, holy ground. A place where we should expect an encounter with God. With what would I want to exchange the opportunity with God for? Visiting a relative I could see on another day? A trip to Morrisons? Some DIY on the house? An extra couple of hours in bed? The reason why churches have traditionally had so many services and activities is because coming together are opportunities to encounter God in a place God has designated and promised He will be.

WHAT DID MOSES DO WHEN HE FACED A HOLY GOD? If we're in a holy place, then how do we behave?

HE HAD TO TAKE HIS SHOES OFF In those days, reverence and respect for God involved removing your shoes. Many religions do it these days which is probably why we don't because we don't want to identify with

them in any way. What was the significance? Let's put it this way. I often visit people's houses and they ask me to take my shoes off. This is not some sort of strange religious rite, but to protect their nice carpets from the dirt that I've picked up on my shoes. Out of respect to them, I remove my shoes. The principle is the same. People took off their shoes to signify that they were not bringing the world with all its sin and corruption into the presence of a holy God. What else did Moses do?

HE COVERED HIS FACE Moses realised that he was talking directly to God. Here was the murderer, the man who had lived for 80 years, first in Egypt and then anonymously as a shepherd, now faced with the reality that he as a sinful man, a man who had little to do with God over those years was not fit to be in God's presence. Common to what we have already read of others' experience of God, each encounter with God was not God bringing these bad guys to book, but showing His love and mercy towards them.

WORSHIPPING A HOLY GOD What can we learn for our encounters with God? When we come to worship, we come to encounter with God. We don't engineer it. It's a promise of a God who always makes the first move. He's already made us God's people. That's significant. Were we expecting to encounter God this morning? Have we acted like we are in His presence? Do we feel we have encountered Him. If worship is an encounter with God, then we should expect to know His presence, be challenged, be encouraged, see lives changed, see the power of God revealed. And if we don't, we know that God promised to turn up! Did we? It's a typical human characteristic for our bodies to be present but our minds to be somewhere else!

I often hear people who are critical of our worship here at MRBC. We're not unique. I've heard the voices of criticism in every church I've ever been in. Maybe you feel that way about what we do here. But let me ask you a question. Did you come here prepared to encounter God this morning?

But, but, but, you may say to me – I find the hymns don't inspire me, or I'd get more out of it if this or that were in the service, or if the preacher was a bit shorter. I'm sure if he'd had the choice, Moses would have much preferred to have his encounter in some Egyptian palace or a great temple instead he was a simple elderly shepherd on some parched mountainside talking to a bush! Encounters with God are about what suits God and not what suits me. It took 40 years of being a wilderness shepherd before Moses was ready to listen to God. How long will it take me?

RECOGNISE HIS HOLINESS Moses was commanded to recognise he was in the presence of a holy God by taking off his shoes. Worship starts when we realise just whose presence we are in. We've come to worship the true and living God. As I said earlier, we dropped the convention of taking our shoes off in the presence of God and in the past we replaced it with our own cultural conventions of respect on the way we worshipped. So for example, when I was young, people wore their Sunday best to church. Worship was done in a way that was regarded as respectful by the standards of those days whether it made any Biblical sense or not. Today we are more informal and we have lost the formality of dress, the "thee's" and "thou's", the organ, and the Authorised Version. I know that some people mourn the loss of these and are concerned at the familiarity with which we treat God. Surely He's holy, different? There is a point at which Moses couldn't approach the bush further because of the difference, distinctiveness, holiness of God was such he could approach no further.

What is a reverential way to approach God? One of the main problems with reverence is that every culture and every generation deals with the issue of reverence and respect differently. What's respect to one society is an insult to another.

As usual it's not what we do or say but who we are and the attitude that brings. However, God gave us the correct balance, the right distance to approach the bush. He is to be called and treated as our Father. In a functional family a parent is one who gets respect, but with whom we are so familiar that we share the intimate part of our lives. Father is what God has designated the appropriate reverence to be. That's because never mind what society or culture we're from, respect for a parent is relatively similar. No complicated rituals, just a simple idea familiar to all that has no misunderstanding or controversy associated with it. Well, if people are involved, perhaps not!

RECOGNISE OUR UNWORTHINESS Moses recognised his own unworthiness when faced with God, such that he covered his face. Part of worship is recognising that of ourselves we are not worthy of being in the presence of God. It's true that God in His love, mercy and grace chose to approach Moses as He had approached Jacob and had plans for them even though they didn't deserve it.

Both men recognised their own unworthiness when faced with a holy God. We are loved by God, that's why He promises to be present as we meet together and worship Him. But let's never be blasé about our sin. God is holy so let's never think that it's OK to come and worship and think it's OK to behave as we please. Why?

RECOGNISE WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST Because we need to recognise who God has made us in Christ. This is the main difference between Moses' position and ours. Because of the death of Jesus and because of our faith in Him, God has set us apart as a holy people. We need to live in a way that reflects the holiness of the God we serve.

WE HAVE CONFIDENCE TO ENTER THE MOST HOLY PLACE BY THE BLOOD OF JESUS So we are people who meet together as a holy temple to offer our worship. Do we cower in fear as Moses did? Actually no as we see in this verse. We have confidence, boldness to enter into the very presence of God, to stand in the most holy place because of what Jesus has done for us. In Jesus we are made holy enough to draw close to God to be on holy ground, in that holy place.

Let's reflect this morning on the implications and responsibility that knowing that places upon us.

HOW SERIOUS ARE WE ABOUT WORSHIP? If worshipping as the people of God brings us into a holy place before God and stands us on holy ground, then it leads me to ask some serious questions:

Am I living a life worthy of being in God's presence. Yes, I am fit to be there because of Jesus, but God calls me to be holy as He's holy. In a few moments I'm going to play a song that gives us time to reflect. For some of us it is going to be a time of confession and a time to allow God to challenge us to put right wrong things and deal with those things in our lives that dishonour Him.

Maybe it will be a time to reflect on all those times we have come to worship and not encountered God because for whatever reason we did not respond to Him for whatever reason whether that was our sin, our heard-heartedness, pride or whatever. Let's ask for His forgiveness.

Finally, if worship is an encounter with God, have we encountered Him. Let's ask Him to speak into our lives as we go into the final part of our service this morning.

HOLY GROUND SONG BY DAVE BILBROUGH

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Prayer