

Sunday 14th January. God's Questions. 'What is that in your hand?'

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Exodus 4v1-17. Signs for Moses

4 Moses answered, 'What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, "The LORD did not appear to you"?''

2 Then the LORD said to him, 'What is that in your hand?'

'A staff,' he replied.

3 The LORD said, 'Throw it on the ground.'

Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it. 4 Then the LORD said to him, 'Reach out your hand and take it by the tail.' So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand. 5 'This,' said the LORD, 'is so that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has appeared to you.'

6 Then the LORD said, 'Put your hand inside your cloak.' So Moses put his hand into his cloak, and when he took it out, the skin was leprous^[a] – it had become as white as snow.

7 'Now put it back into your cloak,' he said. So Moses put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored, like the rest of his flesh.

8 Then the LORD said, 'If they do not believe you or pay attention to the first sign, they may believe the second. 9 But if they do not believe these two signs or listen to you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground. The water you take from the river will become blood on the ground.'

10 Moses said to the LORD, 'Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.'

11 The LORD said to him, 'Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? 12 Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.'

13 But Moses said, 'Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.'

14 Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses and he said, 'What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and he will be glad to see you. 15 You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. 16 He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him. 17 But take this staff in your hand so that you can perform the signs with it.'

We began our new sermon series last week looking at the questions God asks people in the Bible with God's first question to Adam: 'Where are you?' God knew exactly where Adam and Eve were and despite their disobedience, God opened a dialogue with Adam to invite them to repent and know the truth instead of the insidious deception of the serpent. God's questions are deliberately directed and the Bible challenges us to ask the same questions of ourselves. Are we hiding from God, or are we willing to let him shake up our thinking and transform us such that we come alive spiritually in 2024? He has prepared good works for us to do this year if we will trust him to provide for us. But that is the challenge of today's question. 'What is that in your hand?' It was addressed to Moses when God spoke to him from the burning bush in the wilderness, calling him to go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to release the Israelites from their captivity.

To say that Moses was a bit reluctant to trust God and step into leadership is something of an understatement. Five times during the conversation he questions God's call, doubting his own capabilities and the wisdom of God's plan. 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?', he says, doubting his own heritage then verse 13 of chapter 3 he says 'If I go to the Israelites and they ask me "what is his name" then what shall I tell them?' in other words he is asking 'who are you?'

Then our passage begins today with Moses' third question: 'What if they don't believe me?' He says. The questioning is starting to get tiresome, but instead of getting cross with him, God uses what teachers might call diversion tactics to get Moses to focus on something he can be positive about.

"What is that in your hand?"

Like God's first question to Adam, God was inviting Moses to experience a *Metanoia* moment – an opportunity to repent and open his eyes to a new way of thinking.

Moses replied with one word in the Hebrew. 'A staff'. His humble shepherd's staff was a symbol of his low position. Very different from the sceptre of authority he might have carried as the prince of Egypt.

Remember that Moses had run away to live and work in the wilderness after he let his temper get the better of him and murdered an Egyptian. His staff was a simple shepherd's tool of discipline and defence but it was also a symbol of his lowly identity. Nevertheless God told him to put it on the ground and suddenly what was an inanimate object came to life and became a snake.

Moses was terrified – his mind was being blown. Not only was God speaking to him out of the flames of the burning bush, but now even the simple things from his daily life were changing before his very eyes.

After this demonstration Moses' staff came to be known as 'the staff of God' and later Moses would use it to invoke all sorts of miracles – water turning to blood, the parting of the Red sea, water gushing from the Rock and battles won through prayer. In Gods hands the ordinary becomes extraordinary. What's dead comes to life, simple words become prayers of power, and our meagre offerings become God's tools of power.

So what is God asking of us today when we hear that Question 'what is that in your hand?'

What are the ordinary things in our lives that God could take and transform for his extraordinary purposes?

Maybe you like Moses have been through a difficult time. Perhaps you are in the wilderness. But Moses experienced God speaking to him in the wilderness in a really unexpected moment with a radical new calling.

Perhaps you feel like you don't have much to offer – maybe you have been humbled by circumstances or you feel like your past limits your usefulness to God. Well if God can turn Moses' humble stick into a living snake he can transform and revitalise whatever we can offer too. Just think of the boy offering his packed lunch of five loaves and two fish – his mind would have been blown that his offering went on to feed five thousand people!

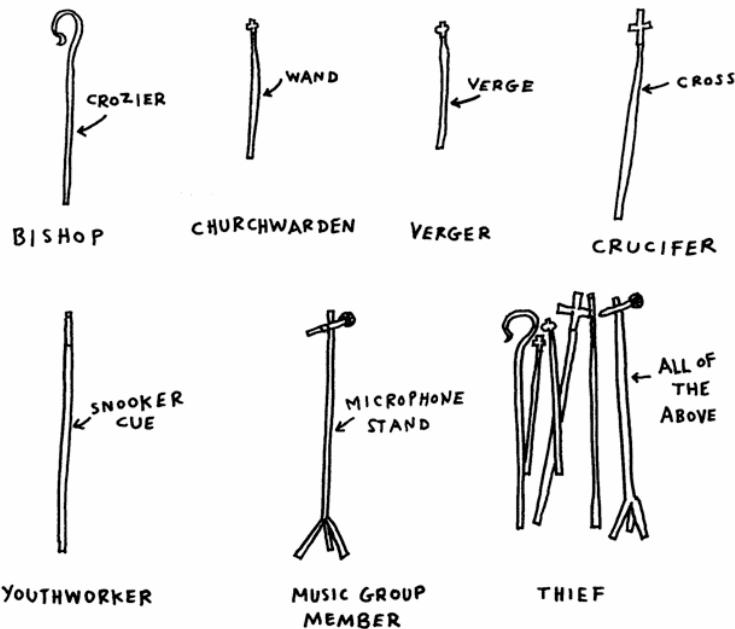
Moses had to lay down relying on his own strength, so that he could take up a life of obedience to God and his plans instead.

It is as we take small steps of obedient faith that we are rewarded with seeing God's power at work. I experienced this with the Carols in the High Street. It was one of my highlights of Christmas when I walked down the path past the centre and heard the wind band rehearsing. I was gobsmacked at all the talent and skill that seemed to have come from nowhere producing such beautiful festive music! I wonder how many others have amazing talents and skills that God wants to put to kingdom use this year?

Moses put his stick down on the ground and God transformed it by his power.

I love this Cartoon by Andrew Walker: 'How to recognise people [in church] by the kind of sticks they are carrying'

HOW TO RECOGNISE PEOPLE BY THE KIND OF STICK THEY ARE CARRYING



What ordinary things might God be asking you to lay before him today that he can transform into something extraordinary?

It is rather strange that Moses' staff turned into a snake – a scary thing that initially terrified Moses. We tend to associate snakes with evil. But as the international symbol for emergency medical aid still depicts today, a snake on a pole later became a symbol of healing for the Israelites.



Jesus recalled this when he said to Nicodemus in John chapter 3 'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, in order that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but have eternal life and live forever!'

On the cross Jesus absorbed sin, sickness and death, such that we can look to him for forgiveness, healing and salvation. He rose again on the first Easter day to show that what was once dead can live again through God's mighty power.

If you are feeling spiritually dead, empty and lifeless today, look to Jesus and the cross for your healing and the new life he offers us.

As well as the staff turning into a snake, God showed Moses another sign of his supernatural power. After putting his hand in his cloak, His hand became diseased but then was fully restored as he followed God's instructions. Finally God instructed Moses that if they don't believe you he was to pour out some water from the Nile onto the dry ground and it would turn into blood in front of them. God would step in with supernatural power as Moses stepped out and took the risk.

But despite all this, Moses still lacked faith, worrying that he would not be eloquent enough and wouldn't know what to say. And the Lord said 'who gave human beings their mouths?... Is it not I, the Lord! Now go, I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.'

In the same way when Jesus sent out the disciples he said to them 'when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say,²⁰ for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.'

The fear of humiliation or 'ego death' is the number one fear in Psychologist Karl Abrecht's hierarchy of fears or the 'feararchy' as it has become known. Higher than our fear of extinction, separation or even loss of autonomy, Moses' fear of humiliation gets to the root of what holds most of us back from living lives that are fully committed and fully free. Fear of humiliation keeps us bound up with anxiety, even though we may have seen God's power in the past. But it is only as we take small risks for God that our faith muscles build and we can go on to do greater things. Untested faith will not grow.

I love the fact that despite the fact that Moses is revered as God's friend, the one who spoke to him face to face, he starts out in his ministry as the patron saint of shirking:

Verse 13: 'Pardon your servant Lord. Please send someone else.'

I'm not surprised the Lord got cross at him then. He has seen his staff turned into a snake, his hand healed, been spoken to from a burning bush and he still says 'Nah Lord – please send someone else!!'
How many of us have thought similar things!

But God is so patient and kind. Instead of obliterating Moses and choosing someone else God asks another question. 'What about your brother Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well.'

We are not left to do this thing alone.

Not only did the Holy Spirit come to be our advocate and comforter but Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs. God knows we need fellowship and encouragement. We are stronger together. One of the reasons I love All Saints is the name of this church – we are All Saints together, on a mission for God.

So let's pray that instead of relying on our own strength, we would have the courage to allow God to fill us with his Spirit and take the ordinary things of our lives and transform them into something extraordinary for him.