

Exodus 34:4-10 - 20th after Pentecost [28.9.2008]

The faithful and gracious God

⁴ So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first ones. Early in the morning he climbed Mount Sinai as the LORD had told him, carrying the two stone tablets in his hands.

⁵ Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and called out his own name, "the LORD," as Moses stood there in his presence. ⁶ He passed in front of Moses and said, "I am the LORD, I am the LORD, the merciful and gracious God. I am slow to anger and rich in unfailing love and faithfulness. ⁷ I show this unfailing love to many thousands by forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion. Even so I do not leave sin unpunished, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations."

⁸ Moses immediately fell to the ground and worshipped. ⁹ And he said, "If it is true that I have found favour in your sight, O Lord, then please go with us. Yes, this is an unruly and stubborn people, but please pardon our iniquity and our sins. Accept us as your own special possession."

¹⁰ The LORD replied, "All right. This is the covenant I am going to make with you. I will perform wonders that have never been done before anywhere in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people around you will see the power of the Lord - the awesome power I will display through you."

The current situation in the politics of our country is a clear example of how things work in this world: those who have the power use it - or abuse it, as the case may be - to get even with their enemies. Unfortunately those who strive for power mostly have only their own interests at heart - others are only of interest to them as far as they can be useful. When they have achieved their usefulness they are dropped in favour of somebody else, who could prove useful.

How different things are in the kingdom of our God. It is true, God does not need to strive for power - he is all-powerful. Yet, the way in which he deals with us people - even when we have once more forgotten his promises and commandments - serves to underline that he is

The faithful and gracious God

Moses had to climb up Mt Sinai a second time with the stone tablets, so that God could once more set his commandments in stone. The first set had been broken, when Moses saw his people - the people of God - dancing around a golden calf and worshipping it. Surely that would be the end of God's relationship with this people. That is the way of this world so often - if somebody has disappointed me, I want nothing to do with them anymore. For a short while seems that God considered this

option, but cutting off his people would have been contrary to who he is.

So Moses receives the command to make stone tablets like the first ones - and was commanded to come into God's presence once more. There God proclaims his 'programme' for Israel - and for us also - when he says: "I am the Lord, I am the LORD, the merciful and gracious God. I am slow to anger and rich in unfailing love and faithfulness. I show this unfailing love to many thousands by forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion. Even so I do not leave sin unpunished, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations."

Moses can do no other than fall down before God's presence. That is the only appropriate response when one comes face to face with God. We see much the same when the apostle John comes face to face with the risen Lord - He falls down 'as though dead'. Yet, our Lord reaches out his right hand to lift up John - much as God reaches out to the people of Israel, to restore them.

For our broken-down relationship with Him, God offers us unconditional forgiveness - so that we may once again enter into His presence. The 'wonders' He does we may experience every day - it is above all the wonder that God knows me, that He loves me, and that He is ready and willing to be with us on each day. It is the wonder that He takes away our sin and makes it possible for us to have a new start - with God and with the people around us.

We have God's promise that He will be with us. That is true, even if we don't seem to 'feel' anything of his presence. God is there - waiting for us; ready to help us, to heal us from the effect of sin in our lives. We can't do without Him - and we don't have to!

We have God's promise of unfailing love and faithfulness - but there is also the other side of the coin: He will punish the one who does not turn back. I wonder sometimes whether living apart from God is not the greatest punishment - that it is a self-inflicted punishment.

God's call, however, is to be free from all such punishment. He invites us to have the life which He gives - in spite of anything we may have done. He invites us to really make a go of making a fresh start - free from all the old baggage we had stored up in our lives; free of being held back by our past; free of being afraid of the future. God promises that our past has been dealt with - that the punishment for our sins has been suffered, and that He will lead us into the future.

So it is not a case of what we may feel - or not. Rather it is a case of God's promise. He promised His covenant to the people at Mt Sinai - He gave a new covenant which was sealed by the blood of His Son on the cross outside the city gates of Jerusalem. We can make a fresh start with our God - today, and on each day of our lives, because our past has been dealt with, and because God has already secured our future!

What does this say about us now, who have experienced God's faithfulness and grace? Are we not also to be faithful and gracious in what we say and do? Are we not to show the world, which is loyal only to its own wishes, which is interested mainly in getting what it can for itself, that there is a different way of living?

God gives his covenant - it is bound up in the commandment: love God above all else, love your fellow-people as you love yourself. That is fairly straightforward. For some it may be too simple, and so - it seems that we often complicate things - through our theology, through the way in which we make rituals of things in church. It may be that we have tied up what God has given us with so much red tape, that we are almost afraid to do anything. We could do something wrong! As if God has nothing better to do than to catch us out doing something wrong as we strive to live as his people!

God has given us his covenant, and it is twofold: we receive so that we can give. We receive from him what we need to have life - so that we will now share his love with a world that is hurting, to heal it from the pain of betrayal. We receive God's forgiveness, so that we share it out to those who have wronged us - and do our best to heal broken-down relationships where we can. We receive God's presence each day anew - and nowhere more than here, when we meet together as his congregation - so that we can bring God's presence into the lives of those who are lonely.

That is what covenant is about: that we experience God's great love for us. There is no other way to respond to this love than to love Him. And then to share this love with the people around us.