

Trinity- Exodus 34:1-8

-Stan has a programme it streams called 'Miracle Workers'.

-Here's the plot;

"A comedy set in the offices of Heaven Inc. When God plans to destroy the Earth, two low-level angels must convince their boss to save humanity. They bet him they can pull off their most impossible miracle yet: help two humans fall in love."

-It stars Steve Buscemi as God and Daniel Radcliffe of Harry Potter fame as one of the angels.

-'God' has lost interest in Earth and is focussed on starting up a restaurant business.

-Now when you hear details like that you realise that the 'God' we're looking at,

-Is nothing like the God of the Bible.

-In fact the story could easily be a reworking of the ancient Greek idea of the gods,

-With a little smattering of Mormonism on the side.

-In episode 6 we get to meet the rest of 'God's' family,

-His father,

-A very Zeus like figure,

-Is disappointed in his son's running of Heaven Inc.

-His brother and sister,

-Who rule over very efficient worlds of their own,

-Ala faithful Mormons,

-Are also disdainful of the Earth and 'God's' running of it.

-These gods really are a creation of human beings,

-And have remarkable similarities to the way we humans behave.

-Today is Trinity Sunday when we focus on the essential nature and character of God.

-If you've been following the season that has ended our Easter celebrations,

-You might have noticed that we started with Ascension, ->

-That celebrates the exaltation of Jesus to heaven 40 days after his death and resurrection.

-This was followed last week by Pentecost,

-When the promised Holy Spirit was poured out upon the faithful believers.

-The season finishes with Trinity Sunday and the reminder there is only one God,

-Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

-Three persons, one God.

-And that's a thought that has boggled the minds of Christians, philosophers and atheist,

-From the time of Jesus until now.

-It's a doctrine that defies human logic.

-But as one theologian says;

"Rationalist objections to the Trinity break down on the fact that they insist on interpreting the Creator in terms of the creature, ie the unity of God in terms of mathematical unity." G.W. Bromiley, 'Trinity' Evangelical Dictionary of Theology

-That's just another way of saying,

-God can only be known on his own terms and not ours.

-And that's what we catch a glimpse of in that Exodus 34 passage.

-On first reading it seems to be mixing up a couple of unrelated strands.

-Verses 1-4 speak of God directing Moses for the re-giving of the Ten Commandments.

-In vv 5-8 we hear God declaring his name and describing his character.

-But to understand God,

-You need to understand he's not like us,

-And that's what those first four verses express.

-All through the Bible the writers attest to the holiness of God.

-God is holy.

-But that term holy is more than an adjective.

-The popular conception of holy is otherworldly piety,

- Bathed in dazzling bright light.
 - But the only part of that description that matches the biblical understanding is the 'other' part.
 - Holy means to be separate or distinct.
 - Throughout Exodus and especially in Leviticus,
 - You see that distinction made with the utensils to be used in the Tabernacle,
 - And their everyday use.
 - Unlike their mundane cousins,
 - All the objects in the tabernacle are to be set aside for the exclusive use in worship of God.
 - If these objects come in contact with anything unclean or worldly,
 - They have to undergo a ritual cleansing or are to be destroyed.
 - At an earthly level these objects reflect the holiness of God,
 - That he's distinct and separate from his creation.
- Listen to v3 in Exodus 34 and you get that message reinforced;
 - "No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain." Exodus 34:3
 - God is here reminding Moses of what he expressed in detail back in Exodus 19 before giving the original Ten Commandments;
 - "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes¹¹ and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³ No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live.'" Exodus 19:11-13
 - And just so the people get the message that God is separate, distinct, holy;
 - "Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently." Exodus 19:18
 - Then the reason for that separation is given;
 - "The LORD said to him, 'Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the LORD; otherwise he will break out against them.'" Exodus 19:24
- All of this reinforces the idea that God is not like us.
 - He is indeed separate and above us,
 - And we can't treat him lightly or flippantly.
 - God is not your mate!
 - But that's only half the story,
 - Because what we see in vv5-8 is that God may be distinct from us,
 - But he's not aloof or disdainful of us.
 - Listen to v5;
 - "The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, 'The LORD.'" Exodus 34:5
 - The Lord descended.
 - It strikes me that that is not just a spatial descriptor.
 - It's what God has to do to relate to his creatures,
 - He has to descend,
 - Come down to our level.
 - It reminds me of Paul's words about Jesus in Philippians 2;
 - "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." Philippians 2:6-7
 - The reason for this condescension is that God is not just holy and different,
 - He's also relational.

- God is not some impersonal force like you'd see in the Star Wars movies.
- The mere fact of our creation ought to be a strong clue that that's the case.
- Back in Genesis 1,
- Even the discussion about the creation of humanity is couched in relational terms;
 - "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;" Genesis 1:26
- Regardless of who you think is the 'us' in these words,
- There is clearly a conversation going,
- And only relational beings can have conversations,
- Can communicate with other personal beings.

- Just as only relational beings can be merciful, gracious and abounding in steadfast love.
- Those are just a couple of terms God uses of himself when speaking to Moses.
- If you have the passage open look at vv6-7;
 - "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,"
- Notice how all those terms are relational.
- And significantly,
- They all require an object to be effective.
- There needs to be another someone who can receive mercy, grace, love and forgiveness.
- As difficult as the doctrine of the Trinity may be for our finite minds,
- Even more difficulties arise for all of those relational activities,
- If there's not an eternal triunity at the heart of the Godhead.
- Just think of love for instance.
- God cannot be love let alone loving,
- Unless he creates some being to express love to.
- Yet within the eternal Godhead there has always been objects of love and loving.
- The Father loves the Son, loves the Spirit, loves the Father.

- Love then must also be eternal,
- Which is why John can write in his first letter;
 - "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." 1John 4:8
- Notice in those words,
- The first phrase about us calls us to act in love,
- But God is not just loving,
- He doesn't just act in love,
- He is love.
- That's the essence of his being.
- That reality of love is expressed in Exodus 34 when God is said to be 'abounding in steadfast love'.
- I came across this helpful summation of the Hebrew word 'hesed' that's translated steadfast love;
 - "the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, furious love of our Father God!"
- Lifts it a little bit above our sappy, romantic understanding of love, doesn't it!!!
- It's that expression of love that again John makes when he says;
 - "This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." 1John 4:10

- So the very core of God is relationships,
- And those relationships are expressed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Here's another reason we need to take God on his terms not ours.
- If God is totally other,
- If God is above and distinct from creation,
- Then we can never know him unless he chooses to reveal himself to us.
- In the New Testament we see this self revelation taking place through the person of Jesus.

- Although there are clues to the Trinitarian nature of God in the Old Testament,
- It's in the incarnation of Jesus that we are given the full revelation of the nature of God.
- In the gospel reading from Matthew for instance,
- Jesus gives his followers the Great Commission to go and make disciples.
- Significantly it's in the commission to baptise that the Trinitarian self revelation occurs;
 - "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," Matthew 28:19
- It's the name not names of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
- The three persons are conjoined in the one name.
- When Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father he replies;
 - "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" John 14:9
- It's through the Son that we can come to know the fullness of the Father and experience his hesed,
- His steadfast love for his creation.

- And it's at this point the Exodus passage comes full circle.
- Verses 1-4 stress the otherness of God,
- His holiness and difference to us his fallen creatures.
- Although we were created in his image,
- That image was shattered by human sinfulness.
- The holiness of God stands opposed to the rebelliousness of humanity,
- And that unholiness cannot stand in the presence of a holy God.
- God proclaims to Moses his steadfast love for the thousandth generation.
- That's a reminder that God's love was not thwarted by our sin at Creation,
- But that he would overcome that loss.
- But his holiness is not the reverse of his justice.
- To our ears v7 sounds harsh,
- We're all for forgiveness but;
 - "visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." Exodus 34:7 ->
- Confronts our sensibilities.
- We think of God punishing the children for the sins of the fathers,
- But what God is reminding us here is that sin cannot go unpunished,
- Justice demands retribution.
- Even in our fallen humanity we recognise that abuse of the innocent,
- Exploitation of the weak,
- Undeserved suffering needs to be set right.
- And God sets it right in one of two ways,
- Through the atoning death of his Son,
- Where those who confess their sins receive mercy and forgiveness,
- Or those who reject his love receive the just punishment for their sins.

- It's the two angels in the comedy 'Miracle Workers' who arrange to save the world.
- But in this real world,
- It's God the Father who saves this world through his Son.
- Therein lies the beauty and majesty of the doctrine of the Trinity.
- But it is not just a lifeless theological proposition.
- Through the Holy Spirit,
- We get to participate afresh in the life we were originally created for in this world,
- And to look forward to the fulfilment of that life in the life that is to come.

