

Advent Reflection for the Sunday before Advent (24.11.19)

'O Adonai'

Exodus 3:1-15
Colossians 1:3-23a

The second antiphon is 'O Adonai' (O Lord):

*O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel,
who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush
and gave him the law on Sinai:
Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.*

Today, our chosen image is the painting, *Landscape with Moses and the Burning Bush* by Domenichino, 1610-1616.



Reflection by Letizia Morley:

This painting by Domenichino is titled *Landscape with Moses and the Burning Bush*, not *Moses and the Burning Bush*. As a visual artist who paints landscapes, among other things, I am aware that Western Europe during Domenichino's lifetime did not yet regard landscape painting as a high art genre in and of itself so landscapes nearly always included human figures, usually allegorical, classical or biblical. However, here we see the landscape is the dominant element, competing with the figure of Moses in the foreground almost as if Moses has a minor part in the grandeur of the scene. The backdrop looks like 17th century Italy, which creates a jarring juxtaposition of the landscape to the biblical desert setting. The area around Moses seems to be desolate and scorched but look beyond it – you will see there is a lush paradise. With Domenichino being of the Bolognese School of painting, it is likely this idealised scene is modeled loosely on a lake in northern Italy. I will come back to this feature of the painting subsequently.

What I notice first when looking at this picture is the castle on the lake, followed by the tree with golden leaves in the centre of the painting and then down to Moses by way of his perpendicular staff. Moses has knelt down in such a way as to form almost a rectangle, similar to a shield protecting himself. His staff anchors him to reality as he peers nervously under his arm at this marvel in front of him. As my gaze moves up, I wonder what is the meaning of the bright crimson drapery on his shoulders. Generally, nothing in a painting is there by chance and I imagine that the red cloth is a reflection of his inner thoughts and emotions. The flames of the bush are igniting a burning in his heart to accomplish the Lord's will for the people of Israel. The drapery doesn't seem to be obeying the law of gravity, especially on the right side, maybe because a blast of hot air from the fire causes it to billow out. The rest of Moses' clothing is as you would expect for a shepherd. His feet are bare as we know from the Exodus passage that he has been instructed by God to remove his sandals on this holy ground. Yet, we do not see them in the painting.

Meanwhile, his sheep, tucked safely away in their pen, are obviously disinterested in whatever is happening to their shepherd. They do not seem to see the blaze and that makes me wonder if only Moses could see it. As I am looking at the burning bush, I start to notice that the same yellow colour is echoed in some of the branches of the towering tree directly above it as well as that prominent tree in the centre of the painting. Curiously, it seems the rest of the landscape is completely green as in summer but the trees closest to the burning bush are tinged with the colours of autumn. And there is a sad excuse for a tree directly to Moses' left that mimics his staff almost exactly. It looks a bit like a doorframe made of two sticks. Is this some kind of entry into the mystery? This small sapling also has yellow leaves. I wonder what is the meaning of the yellow all round Moses? Is the radical change happening inside Moses' heart in this moment having a ripple effect?

It begs the question, 'What is happening to Moses? He is minding his own, probably rather boring, business when God, perhaps not previously successful in attracting his notice by ordinary means, puts on an astounding display. What Moses learns very quickly is that here is a God who is Lord over all: Lord over nature, Lord over all the earth. Adonai is one of the Advent declarations of the nature of God and it means 'Lord'. For those who have grown up in the Christian tradition the title of Lord as applied to God is something read and heard so often that sometimes the eyes and the mind skim over it. In further considering the word 'lord', I start to think about medieval Europe at a time when vassals would swear fealty to a liege. They

would kneel before their lord in homage and pledge an oath of faithfulness and of service. In return the lord would promise some form of provision and support. Moses's posture in this picture seems to be an act of homage to his new Lord and also an indication of awe; Exodus 3.6 says that when God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush 'Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at the Lord'.

Incredibly, four times in this passage spanning Exodus 3.1 to Exodus 4.17 Moses speaks back to God of his doubts and fears that he will not be able to accomplish God's plan for Israel. He brings up his own inadequacies over and over. Imagine meeting the Lord of heaven and earth face' to face and arguing with him! God doesn't punish him, although Exodus 4.14 states, 'the Lord's anger burned against him'. Instead, God slowly convinces Moses through a gentle back-and-forth that He will indeed empower Moses through miracles and God's own mighty presence. Before Moses finally pledges his fealty so to speak—at the first time when he calls God 'O Lord' (in Exodus 4.10)—God has already promised several times over to support him and provide for him. Jane Williams in her reflective book *The Art of Advent* which our house group is reading, sums this up wonderfully. She says:

There must be something in the way in which God draws Moses into dialogue that allows Moses to feel, even in the face of this overwhelming display of power, that he is still valued, his co-operation requested, not coerced. God is not enslaving Moses in order to free others. Freedom is God's goal and that means Moses' freedom, as well as that of the children of Israel.

God's call to Moses is a call to freedom, in Moses's place and time. And yet it is a timeless call to us across the ages. Coming back to the odd contrast of the Italian landscape to Moses' desert scene, I agree with Williams' view on this timeless relationship:

This happens to be Moses' encounter with the divine power, but it is happening in Domenichino's time and country. This happens to be God's call to Moses to fulfil his particular vocation, but, by implication, the burning bush awaits any of us: we might come upon our encounter with God and God's call on our lives anywhere. Domenichino is urging us to attend, so that we will notice our burning bush and leave our accustomed path to investigate and so find out who we are.

At the beginning of this piece I had observed that the prominence of the landscape seems to dwarf Moses' importance in the scene. I think it is meant to. The Lord who has created the heavens and the earth is so much greater than one mere man, no matter that he is the Moses who is remembered throughout all time. Moses is just one small part of God's glorious plan for his creation and we should not forget that when looking at this picture. This whole painting is a 'fill in the blank' where we can visualise our own place in God's story and where we can imagine our own surroundings instead of an Italian lake (unless of course you are fortunate enough to live in northern Italy!). Personally, I see the windswept shoreline of St Andrews, the ruins of the Castle jutting out over it, the rolling farmland stretching to the horizon beyond the town. I see myself standing in front of that scene, trying hard to live out God's call on my life despite everything I think I cannot do.

This Advent I encourage you to look honestly at what you have to offer to God and then to lay all that down before Hi. Let his Spirit and provision empower you to do his work in this world.

O Adonai

Unsayable, you chose to speak one tongue;
Unseeable, you gave yourself away;
The Adonai, the Tetragrammaton,
Grew by a wayside in the light of day.
O you who dared to be a tribal God,
To own a language, people and a place,
Who chose to be exploited and betrayed,
If so you might be met with face to face:
Come to us here, who would not find you there,
Who chose to know the skin and not the pith,
Who heard no more than thunder in the air,
Who marked the mere events and not the myth;
Touch the bare branches of our unbelief
And blaze again like fire in every leaf.

(Malcolm Guite)