“People of the Burning Bush”

Rev Reg Weeks for St Ronan’s Church 12 August 2018

The Burning Bush from our reading in Exodus has long been a symbol of the Presbyterian church, from Scotland all across the world, # #

And although I printed in the last Record the first part of Steve Taylor’s sermon at the Youth conference, I wanted to air his thinking again this morning because I believe it’s good to think again about what the Presbyterian church stands for – as people of the Burning Bush.

I was born a Presbyterian, brought up through Sunday School, and Bible class, to become a confirmed member in my teens, then an elder in my early twenties.
Forty-eight years ago I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister and in all that time I had grown to understand, and love the fact that ours was a Reformed church that keeps on reforming, a church which fostered local initiative, regional support and care, with national governance; that it was governed at each level by a council made up of elders – pastoral elders and teaching elders. For me, the point of being Presbyterian was found in the way we organised our church

But that keynote address three weeks ago was the first time in my memory that I had heard such an inspiring exposition of **why** we are people of the burning bush

“We are people of the burning bush. We come from a long line of ancestors who have found in the burning bush a call to mission.
Not mission as imperialism. Not mission as colonisation.
But Mission as love. Mission as listening. Mission as a vulnerable standing on holy ground.

Steve told us there is a Maori word – mata ora. That translates literally, according to one of his teo reo advisers, as a ‘change maker’, a person who brings change.
There is another way to understand mata ora. That is, as a ‘healthy

face'.
A change maker and a healthy face. Isn't that what we should bring to our communities.

In Samoan, there is a similar word, 'mata ola'. In Samoa, mata ola also means a person who brings change. A person who brings change by entering the village from outside, and by listening.

Steve believes that in our Bible passage, Moses is being asked to be a change agent, a mata ora and a mata ola for his people – as slaves in Egypt.

And so we begin to understand what it means to be Presbyterian.
And we understand mission – as being a change maker; as being the people who bring a healthy face to our community; as people who enter our communities and are known for our listening.

So let's look at the Exodus Bible passage.

First: Mission emerges from love -
On an ordinary working day, beside a mountain called Horeb, a shepherd walks the desert. There is nothing out of the ordinary about his role, he is tending sheep from the family farm.
for his father-in-law Jethro. It's in the midst of such an ordinary situation that Moses hears the extraordinary – what Henri Nouwen has called the "never-interrupted voice of love speaking from eternity."
In v 7 God says "I have indeed seen the misery of my people .. I have heard them crying .. I am concerned about their suffering." It is a wonderful image of God. It is our source and motivation for mission. It is the "never-interrupted voice of love speaking from eternity." And repeated in v 9, where God says "I have indeed – underlined, highlighted, in bold – heard the cry of my people."

This is God. The "never-interrupted voice of love speaking from eternity." Who sees misery. Who sees suffering. Who is concerned about our communities. This is the God of the people of the burning bush; the God that makes us changemakers – mata ora – mata ola.

Second: Mission as openness – On a working day, besides a mountain, a shepherd named Moses responded to the voice of uninterrupted love. In v 4 he says “Here I am.”

They are the same words as were said by Abraham, by Jacob, by Samuel, by Isaiah and by Mary: “Here I am, send me” for Isaiah. “Here I am, let it be with me according to your word,” for Mary.

Each a listener, responding to the voice of love. This is what it means to be Presbyterian.
A Scottish theologian, Alan Lewis, describes the Reformed church, the people of the burning bush, as ecclesia ex auditu, a church formed by hearing, People with ears. Who begin by listening. Hearing love. From God. And in each other. Like Moses, listening for the voice of love, to which we also will say “Here I am.”

Holy ground – On an ordinary working day, ordinary ground becomes holy
for, v 5, God says “Do not come any closer. Take off your shoes for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

Steve told us he grew up, thinking the holy place was the church. That the closer to the front, the more holy it was. He also grew up (as a Baptist) thinking the way his church did worship was holy, the best way, the only way. Yet for Moses, the holy place is the working place, the place where he listens.

This must change how we see holiness. Every working place, every social encounter, every community, every young person, is potentially a place that becomes holy as we hear the voice of uninterrupted love.

What does it mean for us, and for those we care for, and for the way we plan our programmes and understand our mission, if the voice of uninterrupted love is already present in every working place, in our community?

Third: Mission as love. Mission, as here I am, listening. Mission as vulnerable, standing on holy ground – that's what it was for Moses. But we're not Moses. Are we? Any Moses? We're not Moses.

But we are Presbyterians.
We are people of the burning bush. We come from a long line of ancestors who've found in the burning bush a story of life and vitality.

This burning bush has renewed us.
This burning bush has given us identity.
This burning bush has given us a mission.
And one of that long line of ancestors was Ronan of Iona.
I mention this because next Saturday St Ronan's feast day

Ronan Kilmaronene, was a seventh century monk of Irish descent, who joined St Columba's religious community on the Isle of Iona, just north of Mull in the Inner Hebrides. He became a leading figure in the early Christian Church in Britain and rose to be a bishop. He's referred to by the Venerable Bede who recorded the controversy with his countryman St. Finan, Bishop of Lindisfarne. Ronan, a well-educated man, won the argument over the correct way to calculate the date of Easter, which was settled at the Synod of Whitby, in 664, when his views were upheld.

According to legend, Bishop Ronan drove the devil out of Leithen valley, Peebleshire in the Scottish borders. The story says 'He had a confrontation with the Devil, whom he 'cleiked' (whacked, good and proper) with his Staff!' Later the bishop blessed the natural spring at Innerleithen, which became a holy well, and was eventually renamed Saint Ronan's Well, inspiring Sir Walter Scott to write his celebrated novel of the same name.
Sir Walter Scott actually became the honorary 'keeper' of Saint Ronan's Well. His novel was first published in 1824 and caused many people to visit the well, and on the back of this, the Saint Ronan's Border Games were instituted in 1827.
These games are the oldest organized sports meeting in Scotland.

Since 1900 the Cleikum Ceremonies have become central to the festivities. They involve crowning both the girl and boy whose achievements have made them Dux of the local St Ronan's school. The day's celebrations mark the town's association with its Patron Saint, and his strong emphasis on education – another strong value among Scottish Presbyterians!

Our St Ronan's was so named because the wife of the donor of this property came from Innerleithen, and the new church was named in her honour.
Much later, .John and Sue Jones visited Innerleithen and brought back the Celtic cross which graces our communion table, and the year before taking up ministry here in 1993 my daughter and I visited the town during my study leave, and when Diane and I visited Iona some years ago now I brought back the communion cup and plate we are using today.

Which brings us back to that teaching of Jesus recorded for us in the reading from John's gospel that so troubled his disciples that day when he was preaching at the Synagogue in Capernaum.

I am the bread of life, I am the Living bread, the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh, Eat my flesh. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me."
If the congregation took him literally no wonder they had difficulty.

But if they thought about it, they would remember that the sages and rabbis had long taught that Torah was the Bread of Life. Nobody took that literally, and Jesus himself said to his disciples by way of explanation "It is the spirit that gives life: the flesh is useless. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life."
That's what John eventually understood when he penned this gospel - Jesus himself was the new Torah, not the words on a dusty old scroll but the living Word, The Word that was with God, in the beginning, the Word that was God. In him was life - the very bread of life itself, and every time we take the bread and wine, that is what we remember.