**Sunday service, The Swiss Church in London**

**6 June 2021, Reverend Carla Maurer**

**Welcome**

“Crisis produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Romans 5:3-5)

„Krisen bewirken standhaftes Ausharren, das standhafte Ausharren aber stärkt den Charakter, Charakter aber die Hoffnung; die Hoffnung wird uns nicht enttäuschen; denn die Liebe Gottes ist ausgegossen in unsere Herzen durch den Heiligen Geist, der uns gegeben worden ist.“

“Détresse produit la persévérance, la persévérance la victoire dans l'épreuve, et la victoire dans l’épreuve l'espérance. Or cette espérance ne trompe pas, parce que l'amour de Dieu est déversé dans notre cœur par le Saint-Esprit qui nous a été donné.”

Dear parishoners, dear friends

Welcome back!

Times of crisis strengthen the character, and a strong character produces hope, Paul says in his letter to the Romans, an experience that we’re probably all familiar with. If we look back on our own life, often the most important turning points were triggered by a time of suffering or trouble. Once on the other side of the tunnel, we look back slightly astonished to have made it through; and as we carry on our life’s journey, we begin to make sense of what we’ve been through. This can take years, and sometimes the pain is so intense that it seems as if we’re never going to get out on the other side. Or, as we are going to hear later in the story of the burning bush, it can feel like a blazing bush that is never consumed.

Every crisis is different, and how we experience a crisis is very individual too. Yet we can reasonably hope that whatever we are going through it will strengthen our endurance and our character in the long run and build a foundation for hope – a hope that brings change.

I am delighted to welcome back High Holborn Choir today. Please be reminded that we are still not allowed to sing in church, however if you would like to gently hum into your mask, that might be a good alternative.

**Opening Prayer**

God of heavens and earth

Here is our prayer. Hear our prayer.

We are here.

We are still here.

Look upon us with your compassionate eyes.

Embrace us with your comforting love.

We are confused. We are relieved.

We are sad. We are happy.

We are excited, insecure, anxious and impatient.

We are still here,

full of hopes and dreams in a broken world.

We are still here,

full of compassion and love for your creation.

“I am who I am” is your holy name.

You made us in your image.

We are who we are.

Give us the strength to mend what has been broken.

Be our healer. Be our strength.

Be our beacon, our stronghold, our rock.

In you is peace. In you is justice. In you is healing.

Amen

**Reading Exodus 3:1-14**

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” He said further, “I am the God of your father and mother, the God of Abraham and Sara, the God of Isaac and Rebecca, and the God of Jacob, Leah and Rachel.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” God said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.”

**Sermon**

Dear parishoners, dear friends

I recently spoke to one of my cousins in Hamburg on the phone, among other things about the coronavirus, of course - what else! At some point he said: “it’s so important during these times to have spiritual guidance from Ministers like you.” I felt a little bit caught out, because here is the thing: I’m not quite sure what guidance I can give, and I often struggle to find words to say. I can’t really make sense of it all myself, and I feel so powerless thinking of the huge global consequences this health crisis brings. Like everyone else, I have been affected by this crisis, predominantly spiritually and also mentally.

Interestingly my cousin’s comment has reaffirmed my choice of reading for today’s service. When I first started thinking about the sermon, one particular Bible verse popped up in my mind: “I am who I am.”

*Moses and the Burning Bush*

These words are embedded in one of the most famous stories in the Bible, involving the most important Prophet in the First Testament: Moses and the Burning Bush. Moses is the Prophet who led the people of Israel out of captivity and gave them God’s law, basic rules how to live together. This law is written down in the Tora, the first five books of the First Testament.

Moses was a Hebrew born into slavery in Egypt but adopted and raised by the Pharaohs royal family. His mother had secretly hidden him after the Pharaoh had threatened to kill all firstborn male Hebrew children. A daughter of the Pharaoh found the new-born in a basket on the Nile and raised him as an Egyptian prince.

Later in his life, as a young man, Moses killed an Egyptian slave-master who was beating a Hebrew. He had to flee to avoid punishment and encountered God who was speaking to him from within a burning bush. God sent Moses back to Egypt to liberate his people and lead them into freedom, ad act that demanded courage. Forty years of wandering in the desert followed where the Israelites received the 10 commandments and finally settled in the promised land.

This story cycle, referred to as the Exodus, builds the foundation of the Abrahamic religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And so, in the middle of this story cycle, God reveals their name to Moses, which makes these words so very significant. Moses asks: “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” – God answers: “I am who I am, is my name”, or grammatically more precise: “I will be who I will be.”

*Crisis – a turning point*

The encounter of Moses with God happens in a moment of crisis. Moses had killed a slave-master, and to avoid scrutiny and punishment he had to flee his homeland. Now the word ‘crisis’ is an interesting one. When we use the word today, it has a predominantly negative or threatening connotation. We understand crisis as an event or period that may lead to an unstable or dangerous situation for a group or individual, a testing time or even an emergency. Crisis are considered negative changes that often occur with little warning. However, the original meaning of crisis, from the Greek work ‘Krises’, means “turning point” or “decision”.

Often, we experience crisis as both: a negative or even threatening experience, but also as a life changing and decisive time that brings change also for the better. We meet new people and receive help from unexpected places. We find pleasure in small things. We acquire new skills and surprise ourselves with how resilient we are. Almost every crisis, be it personal or global, comes with a mix of negative and positive emotions. Heartache and hope go hand in hand – although it is important to say that some crisis can be so devastating that it is hard to see any light, and some troubles are so all consuming that they break us.

*God, the compassionate companion*

Moses encounters God in a moment of great crisis, both a personal as well as a more global crisis. The Hebrews had endured slavery for generations. They are traumatised and stuck. Although Moses was raised in the Pharaoh’s royal family, a world of privilege, he always sensed that he was somehow different. He felt compassion with the enslaved Hebrews, and one day, when he saw a slave-master mistreating a Hebrew, he lost his temper and killed the Egyptian. Consequently, he lost his house, his security, his family and had to flee with little hope of ever returning.

It was in this moment of crisis that God revealed his name to him: “I am who I am” – “I will be who I will be.” There are two crucial aspects in this revelation:

Firstly, God sees and acknowledges the suffering of her people. He says to Moses: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry. Indeed, I know their sufferings.” The God of the Hebrews, our God, is not a distant God. That might seem obvious, but it wasn’t for the people back then. The gods of their ancestors were characterised as remote and indifferent, not massively interested in people’s fate. So, a compassionate and caring God who even comes down to call people to action was a revolutionary thought and a revelation! Yet rather than intervening herself, God empowers people to act on his behalf, to do the unthinkable, to change their ways and move mountains. We are the stewards of the caring and compassionate God whose name is I-am-who-I-am.

Secondly, God is not static, but changeable, ever becoming and walking with us through history, which is expressed in this name: “I am who I am.” God is who he is for the person she is with. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: “A God that exists, does not exist.” As we are going through different stages in life, turning points, decisions, crisis, God is there, becoming with us, holding us, acting and interacting with the world.

And yet, God’s shifting nature is not a free pass to justify all our actions, good or bad. Each turning point, each crisis in life, is a call to listen and learn and, to the best of our abilities, become more understanding and compassionate than before – a better character, as Paul says, and hence a source of hope and healing. We may not always succeed, but we must try. I-am-who-I-am is with us, on every step of the journey.

God went on the journey with Moses, and Aaron and Miriam, women, men and children, and their kettle. Their journey was difficult, and they sometimes wished they would have stayed in Egypt as slaves. But there was no turning back, and they eventually arrived in the promised land as free people. And that very same God still walks with us, right now, right here, and will always be walking with her people.

“I know that God is here.

I know this because,

with my sould bare and my body naked,

God looked on me with love

and responded to my cry for help.”

Amen

**Announcements**

* The AGM will take place on 20 June, at 2:30pm, on zoom. There will be an audio service uploaded on the webpage.
* Haircuts for people affected by homelessness will resume monthly, starting on 15 June
* The 2021 Goldsmiths exhibition WEEDS will take place from 21-26 June.

**Prayers of Intercession**

I-am-who-I-am

Hear our cry for help.

Hear our prayers as we navigate through life.

We pray for people who endure insufferable circumstances.

We pray for prisoners in solitary confinement and those enduring torture.

We pray for parents who have lost a child.

We pray for those who are exposed to ongoing violence and abuse.

We pray for people with an incurable disease.

We pray, I-am-who-I-am, be God and companion, show compassion and bring hope, send your stewards to move mountains and do the unthinkable in situations where there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel. You are that light. Hear our cries. Know our suffering. Lead us to the land where milk and honey flows.

*Kyrie eleison*

I-am-who-I-am

We thank you for you have given us the strength to be together in this time of global crisis. You have brought us together today to listen to the good news and be filled with your holy spirit. Come to us and make us new. Strengthen our mind, strengthen our character so we can be beacons of hope.

Speak to each one of us in a unique way to strengthen our commitment to the people of our towns and communities now that we are suffering the consequences of what we have done to your creation.

*Kyrie eleison*

I-am-who-I-am

In a moment of silence we bring before you our own individual prayers…

(Silence)

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Blessing**

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Gott segne und behüte Dich; Gott lasse sein Angesicht scheinen über dir und sei dir gnädig; Gott hebe ihr Angesicht über dich und gebe dir den Frieden.

Que l'Eternel te bénisse et te garde! Que l'Eternel fasse briller son visage sur toi et t'accorde sa grâce! Que l'Eternel se tourne vers toi et te donne la paix!

Amen