

WHEN YOU FEEL ALIVE – IN PURSUIT OF TRUE RELIGION  
A Sermon on the Threshold of Fall; Sunday Sept 3, 2017  
St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC  
The Very Rev. Ken Gray

---

For over forty years, *Portland Al's Gifts and Groceries* welcomed the Vancouver Blues Community into a world of Blues music performance and collectibles. I never visited, but some of you did. One of you walked into the store and saw photographs of famous musicians pinned to the wall - BB King, Jimi Hendrix - but . . . *no Elvis*. So imagine my surprise when I leaned just a few days ago, that when Elvis performed in Vancouver on August 31, 1957, Elvis indeed stood in front of that Third and Main street counter.

For most of us, this is no big deal; but for Elvis fans, it's a *Moses and the burning bush* moment. Knowing of this visit, other customers knew themselves to be *standing on Holy Ground*. The veracity of the story continues to be debated by some who have a sense of the cultural impact of this Gospel-influenced musician. And the folklore generates life for many.

Similar stories are told in the traditions of faith communities. Remember Moses, the prophet who under the direction of a liberating God, guided an oppressed people from slavery to freedom in a promised land. From a spiritual experience comes a defiant and political act, which then becomes the religion called *Judaism*. Remember this as I read these words from today's Collect:

Author and Giver of all good things,  
graft in our hearts the love of your name,  
increase in us **true religion**,  
**nourish us** in all goodness,

and **of your great mercy** keep us in the same;

As a Baptized Christian, as a priest and preacher, I continue to wonder “what is true religion?” Is it something learned or earned; something received, something taught, practiced or embodied? I shall be very Anglican and say “it’s all of these things” and it is . . . That said, what can we take from today’s lections to inspire the religion we claim to profess and practice?

In Exodus we discover a bush which burns while remaining intact. Something in me needs to say, especially here in the BC interior, don’t try this at home . . . Like Elvis at *Portland A’s*, something unusual, something amazing, something miraculous is going on here. Moses (and you and I) are always standing on Holy Ground. Gordon Light sings

Walk gently on the earth, Holy Ground  
Light be our footsteps on the path, Holy Ground  
The earth a dwelling for each kind,  
It is not ours alone  
We share the soil, the seas, the winds,  
This is our common home (Gordon Light 2009)

The ground upon which Moses stands however, seems somehow extraordinary. Read further, and pay attention to the verbs. First Moses *turns aside* and *looks* at this great sight. Next *the Lord sees* that Moses had turned to see. And *God calls out* of the bush. Moses meets God, and then panics! God is undaunted. Again, pay attention to the verbs. *God speaks*,

*“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 . . .

So far, so good Moses thinks. Challenge however looms large. If the vision is *departure*, the strategy is *confrontation*!

“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?” He said, “*I will be with you . . .*”

Well, thinks Moses, this is good to know, but *what?* And *how?* And *when?* Will this happen? And *through whom?* 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.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Now this may be one of those times when scripture could be a little more clear. So many commentators have tried to unpack God’s name here “I am who I am.” When called upon, would you explain God to a seeker with the words “I am who I am” – it’s ambiguous at best, but confusing most of the time. Things become more clear in John’s Gospel where John identifies Jesus the Messiah in phrases like “I am the Good Shepherd” or “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Today however God remains obtuse - either because we don’t understand the culture in which the name was uttered, or because the author of Exodus knows that God’s Holy Presence cannot be adequately expressed in language (this aligns well with the prohibition against

naming God in Hebrew mythology as to name someone or something is to possess or control it).

We learn more about God in watching the escape and emancipation of the pilgrim people of Israel, as we see God walking with them as a nation through all sorts of trials and tribulations, treasons and triumphs through a rich and continuing history.

Likewise, with Christians such as St. Paul, God is named and described; but we learn most when we see the effects of Godly wisdom and presence in and on peoples' lives. We know Paul, the former persecutor of Christians, as one consumed by a desire for Godly vengeance against Christians, now as an unexpected convert to the Jesus way of living. It is hard to reconcile the image of Saul holding the cloaks of those who would stone Stephen, with the Paul of the Book of Romans,

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. **Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.** Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

As I move towards my sixtieth birthday I can look back with a mixture of satisfaction and frustration, to the events and circumstances of priestly ministry, activism and politics, family life, musical and other artistic engagement, travel and adventure . . . and say that I have moved with the times, grown in many ways, lost and gained, and kept the faith. My learning continues to be lifelong, and it is hopefully not over yet.

I have made sacrifices and taken risks, succeeded and made many mistakes. Much of the malaise of the Christian Church today arises from its discomfort with risk and challenge, its inability to admit error and its

tendency to deny reality on many levels. What Jesus shared with his disciples connects to a great extent with my own decisions and challenges,

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

In such words we clearly see what direction Jesus' own life will take. Regarding our own paths, and to the question of “what is true religion” I would say it involves an awareness of what is going on in human experience infused with and affected by divine presence, a strange mixture which draw us beyond what is or has become ordinary to what is best called extra-ordinary. In visiting with folks I often use the language of *life* and *liveliness*. So what then makes us lively? I like a quote from modern dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham:

You have to love dancing to stick to it. It gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no paintings to show on walls and maybe hang in museums, no poems to be printed and sold, nothing but that single fleeting moment **when you feel alive**.

I hope you feel alive, today, and dare I say, every day. I hope you can find with me energy and support for the journey. Back to Elvis, who was substantially formed by Gospel music, in texts like

Walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain  
Though your dreams be tossed and blown

Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart  
And you'll never walk alone, you'll never walk alone