

God's changing mind

Exodus 32:1-14

*There once was a girl named Jenny
Whose virtues were varied and many
Excepting that she was inclined
Always to make up her mind...
Poor Jenny Bright as a penny
Her equal would be hard to find.
Deserved a bed of roses but history discloses
That she would make up her mind.*

I don't know if you know that song from the Kurt Weil, Ira Gershwin musical, *Lady in the Dark*. *The Saga of Jenny*, as it is known, is a comic look at the consequences of making up your mind too decisively and irrevocably. It's a funny way of reminding us that our decisions, all of them, great or small, have consequences for ourselves and for others.

Decisiveness is seen as a virtue. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, 'For if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to battle?'ⁱ Jesus says in His Sermon on the Mount, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."ⁱⁱ Make up your mind, and stick to what you have decided seems to be the order of the day.

Yet in our reading this morning, we find something different. We find the children of Israel, terrified that Moses has gone off, even if he is speaking to God, and won't return leaving them without their leader, and without their access to God. They panic, they make a Golden Calf to worship, as if this would somehow fill the gap.

From a distance, God sees what is going on, and how His chosen people, His children, have corrupted themselves. Despite everything God had done for them – protected them, fed them, gave them water to drink – provided them with shelter, saved them from Egyptian slavery, led them through the sea, and now through the desert towards a Promised Land – despite all of that, they had turned away. Instead of the living, caring, providing God, they put their trust into a thing made by their own hands, a Golden Calf. How could these people be so blind to all that God had done for them? God was enraged.

“Stiff-necked people” God calls them, and in the white hot heat of His anger, God determines to destroy them. Eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth before they had come into existence. The Israelites get no more than they deserve. Angering God and turning your back on God have consequences. There are plenty more people who could be chosen and blessed and given a Promised Land. The End. Amen. But it’s not.

In one of the most audacious stories in the Bible, stammering, nervous, man-with-a-past Moses speaks out. ‘Are You sure, God? Look at what You have done, God. Could You turn away from this, God?’ “And the Lord repented of the evil which He thought to do to His people.” God changed His mind.

Nor should we be surprised. God changes His mind when Abraham persuades Him initially to spare Sodom and Gomorrah; God changes His mind in the time of Amos, and in the time of Jonah. Instead of a strong, decisive, clear-visioned Creator, thundering and smiting the reprobates of the world, are we lumbered with a lily-livered, spineless deity who can’t hold on to a decision for more than two consecutive minutes?

Of course not.

Moses appealed to God’s reasonableness – why would God destroy what God has gone to great effort to preserve?

Moses appealed to God’s reputation – what would the neighbours say? Does God want to jeopardise God’s good name?

Moses reminds God of God’s promise – God had sworn to protect the people and lead them to a land of freedom and promise.

After Moses has spoken, I imagine a silence. Which to Moses may have seemed an eternity. Who disagrees with God? Who holds God to account? Who argues with God?

In response, God doesn’t say anything to Moses. God simply changes His mind. He repents, which means to turn away. God did not destroy the people. Hard times would come, other days of decision would come for the people, but God remembers the promises made, and keeps to them.

I remain struck by this idea of God repenting, turning away from evil. Evil is anything in life that makes for less than total well-being. The God of Israel is revealed as a God of change. God will move from decisions made, from courses charted in view of the ongoing interaction with those affected. God treats the relationship with the people with an integrity that is responsive to what they say and do.ⁱⁱⁱ There is a genuine openness to the future. It is this openness to change that reveals, ironically, what is unchangeable about God. Because of what we do and how we are, God changes, so that God can keep on forgiving us. Because of what we do and how we are, God changes, so that God can keep on relating to us. Because of what we do and who we are, God changes, so that God can keep on loving us. Because of what we do and who we are, God changes, so that God can keep on saving us.

God will always act, God will always have a plan B, God will even make changes, in order to be true to God's mercy, and care, and concern, and love; for us.

God's justice is tempered with mercy, and when the two qualities clash, the former yields before the latter. Justice is not justice unless it is administered in love.^{iv}

If that was true in this story of the Israelites, it holds true today, for us. Despite all that God continues to do for us, we still get it wrong. We place other things higher in life than our love of God. We make God an option, one among many, because our priorities are, well, different. We're busy, we're tired, we're selfish, we're lazy, we're not perfect, we forget, we make mistakes, we turn away. "Oh, it'll be all right, God won't mind". I don't know that I'd be so ready to take God for granted in that way. Maybe I should be like Moses and argue with God on your behalf! Maybe you should argue with God on my behalf! I suppose the thing that give us hope is that there are people out there who treat God with respect, and courage, and faith, and wrestle with that most vital and most challenging of relationships, the one humanity has with the living God. This God Who, thank God, changes His mind and turns away from destruction, so that He can keep on forgiving and blessing and caring and loving and saving.

God changes His mind about you; I wonder how many of us need to change our minds about the people around us in our lives, who've hurt us, or let us down, or been stupid about something.

For me God changing His mind doesn't weaken God, it strengthens Him and makes God more alive, more unpredictable, more real. Not a thing of gold, made by our own hands, but a person of Eternity, moving and shifting and responding and breathing. I'm glad Moses argued with God to keep God honest. But I'm even more glad that God changed His mind. It gives me, and you, hope.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ I Corinthians 14:8 (KJV)

ⁱⁱ Matthew 5:37 (RSV)

ⁱⁱⁱ Terrence E Fretheim, Exodus: Interpretation Series, p287

^{iv} Texts for Preaching Year A, pps 517-8