

I'm really struck by a little phrase that we heard in the Deuteronomy passage this morning: "never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, *whom the LORD knew face to face.*" It is an echo of a similar sentence in Exodus, where we read that "the LORD would speak to Moses *face to face, as one speaks to a friend.*" (Exodus 33.11)

This was a completely unheard-of way of being before the most holy God, Creator of All. And from this relationship, this 'face to face' friendship, flowed the liberation of Israel, the giving of the law, and the entry into the promised land. Everything that happened to and for the people of Israel was based in this relationship between one man, and the divine Presence who came near to him, face to face.

Much later in Israel's history there was another man, Jesus, who called God 'Father', and who said to his disciples: 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.' (John 15.15) Jesus had an intimate relationship with God as his Son, and taught his disciples to know that this was possible for them too.

Finally, Moses' desire: 'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!' (Numbers 11.29) has come to pass. Any of us that wishes, is invited into this 'face to face', 'heart to heart' relationship with God, where Jesus continues to call us his friends through his indwelling Spirit.

It is from this place that we understand our Gospel reading today. Jesus has been pushed and pushed by the religious teachers – aggressively questioned to see if he would make a mistake. And he has responded by making it clear to them, through some pretty hostile teaching, that they are the ones who are facing judgement for having badly led the people astray. And now, when they try another line of questioning, Jesus basically says to them "guys, your focus is completely out of whack. The law was only ever about love. The commandments were only ever about creating the kind of society where people were free to love God, and love people. And while we're on that, you've interpreted all this stuff from a completely human point of view. You've judged and condemned people, treating the law as a human system of control that you're in charge of.

You even think the Messiah is going to fit your human, tribal ideas about lineage. You've studied the Scriptures but you've neglected God. It's so much more cosmic than that!! I'm standing here in front of you – not David's son but God's Son, and all you can do is wrangle and undermine." From that day, we read, the religious leaders didn't dare ask any more questions.

We are all of us idolaters. And religion is one of the great idolatries. An idol is anything that stands in between us and God, that over time we come to treat 'as' God, or as more important than God. Whereas Moses led the people from his 'face to face' relationship with God, over time the religious leaders of Israel had ceased to know God, and instead had a relationship with the law. Which, being human, they interpreted in ways that gave them power, and imposed impossible burdens on others.

The same goes in our own time. People love the church tradition, without knowing and loving God and people. People love and study the scriptures, without knowing and loving God and people. At both ends of any spectrum of belief or preference in the church – whether evangelicalism or liberalism, traditionalism or radicalism, high or low church, Catholic or Protestant, politically left or right wing, there are people whose position is simply – idolatrous. Idolatrous because the defence of the position is more important and more all-consuming to them than face-to-face connection with God.

In this age of social media, there's the potential for this to get worse. In our lives today there is less and less that happens 'face to face.' I read a fascinating article this week (based on a Jesse Mulligan interview on RNZ) that looks at the difference between happiness and pleasure. Neuroscientists now confirm that our 'reward system' in the brain that's triggered by short term pleasure (think chocolate, alcohol, fast food, facebook, shopping, crap TV entertainment) leads increasingly to addiction and depression through the way the chemical dopamine works in our brains. But real happiness is built up slowly by the increase of serotonin in our bodies, which happens through good nutrition, good sleep and exercise, *giving to others without any reward, and social connection – real eye to eye human contact, not by way of social media.*

It turns out that this 'face to face' business is the key to human well-being. And Jesus tells us that this involves not just loving our neighbour as ourselves, but it's something that we need to cultivate with God above all else. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*

We have much to learn here from our Māori brothers and sisters, for whom 'kanohi ki te kanohi' – real physical being together underpins wider relational concepts of whakawhanaungatanga and manaakitanga.

In the church we have a word that attempts something similar. It's 'communion.' Which refers both to the bread and wine, where Jesus comes to be present in and among us, and to the oneness and connection that we share in together when we gather at the table, and in prayer, and in the everyday flow of life. This is a connection that we share even with our dead, in the communion of saints.

If we want a share in the life of God, and if we want to discern God's will and live in God's ways, then we, like Moses, like Jesus, need to cultivate habits of communion with God and others. This starts with prayer. And not just the kind of prayer that lists our needs before God, like some giant Santa Claus. The prayer I'm talking about sits with an open and listening heart before God in the silence, letting our thoughts and wants gently drift away while we say 'yes' to the presence of the great 'You' who is closer to us than our breath. And it continues whenever we choose to 'be with' another person, face to face, eyes to eyes, and to work hard to listen and care. It continues when we invite people – even strangers – to sit at our meal tables. In this way, we become friends with God, friends with others, and ultimately we also become a friend to ourselves. *For now, we see in a glass, darkly, but then we will see face to face.*