

Moses – an Obedient Servant

My father-in-law was called Alex McSporran. He was given the name Alla but I'm sure that this had no direct reference to the Islamic faith, rather It was probably that his siblings, in their early days, had difficulty with his name Alexander.

But Alex or Alla as he was known in the village of Tarbert was one of the most popular characters in the village. He was a plumber – he inherited the family business which was well known in the village, and he would get a cup of tea at anyone and everybody's house.

When I asked him for Susan's hand in marriage, I never got a straight answer from him - other than *John MacGregor you're a decent fella.*

So, 36 years ago, he became my father-in-law, sadly no longer with us.

Today we encounter the story of Moses' father-in-law Jethro. They first met when Moses escaped the wrath of Pharaoh and ended up as a nomadic farmer in the desert. He was given the hand of Jethro's daughter Zipporah.

Now many years later and Moses is in the desert again, this time with thousands upon thousands of people who had escaped persecution.

Jethro comes to Moses with his wife and his children. Moses had no doubt sent them off to his father-in-law's when he was escaping from Egypt. They were evacuated and now a time of reunion.

Moses shares with Jethro what God has done for them in leaving Egypt. The hardships and the triumphs. Jethro is delighted for Moses and the next day, he observes his son-in-law in action. He watches closely as Moses reaches out to his community and acts as judge for all the different cases that are brought to him.

He is less than impressed, and Jethro has a quiet word in his son in-law's ear. *You're going to burn yourself out, you need to take better care of yourself. You need to get a structure in place, so that the burden of work doesn't fall solely on your shoulders. You have a position to be the mediator between God and your people, but that doesn't mean that you get involved in every legal case.*

You need to organize things a lot better Moses, and get the right people around you, people who are Godly, responsible and gifted and who are able to take control of things and make the right judgments while you deal with the big issues.

It's a great story tucked away in the middle of the book of Exodus.

I could have chosen any story today from Exodus to speak about Moses' life. He is the next of the great patriarchs of Israel. We have considered Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and now Moses.

I'm sure that we are familiar with the story of Moses. How he was saved by his mother's faith – placed in a basket in the Nile, near to where Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe. Moses' mum needs great credit for being a wise woman and a woman with great faith. She saw the opportunity for her son and from this she was blessed. Moses touched the heart of the princess and his mum, incredibly, was paid and charged with the responsibility of looking after him. But in time Moses went to the Palace and the hand of God on his life was evident for all to see.

The child was protected under the mighty hand of the princess and loved by the gracious hands of his mother. Moses had the best of both worlds, brought up in the Palace and educated at their great Temple of learning, known today as the Oxford of the ancient East but also blessed with his Jewish culture and faith. He grew in knowledge and wisdom. He became a statesman and a soldier. But it took him to forty years to see the world differently, the world outside the Palace, the world of his biological parents. His blood boiled as he saw how his people were being treated by the Egyptians.

God was at work in Moses!

You will remember the story of Moses defending an Israelite against an Egyptian, and he murdered him. The story of Moses in the desert and his marriage and grandchildren. His story of the Burning Bush and his return to Egypt to set God's people free. The plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, the experiences in the wilderness, the Ten Commandments, the formation of a nation, water from the rock, manna from Heaven and then the Promised Land. What a story and so many different events to choose from, but today we zoom in on the story of Moses being taught a lesson from his father-in-law Jethro.

I love this encounter. It gives us an insight into Moses' character, his family life, and we see him as a person, not just as a leader of a nation, but as a family man with pressures and anxieties of life.

It teaches us the importance of developing character and dealing with the pressures that life brings to us. For we all face different pressures in life.

It shows us how God was at work in Moses' life, and how Moses was to become the meekest and least obtrusive of men, conscious to a fault of his own

weaknesses, and at every step looking for guidance and help. Life experience knocked the sharp edges from him and smoothed his character.

The story of Moses is a story of character building and God doing a work of grace in his life. Not only was God delivering a nation from slavery, he was changing a people into being fit and ready for the promised land and Moses as leader was being changed.

It was said that Moses was the meekest man on earth.

Surely this title is not right for Prince of Egypt, liberator of the Jewish people, freedom fighter, murderer, shepherd in the desert for 40 years – meekest and yet it is true, for meekness is not weakness but meekness is that Divine Spirit that allows someone to listen and learn from others.

It's a great quality to have, and Jesus said, *blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth*. It is the spirit of a true Christian. Someone who has a teachable spirit and who is willing to listen and to be obedient.

This spirit is evident in our reading today. Moses listens to his father-in-law Jethro, and learns from him, and puts into practice his father-in-law's words.

So, this is a passage of how to cope with stress. When this world is getting too much for us and we are holding on by our finger tips.

What do we do?

How do we get help?

Well perhaps we need to take advice.

Who can we talk to? What family member is close to us, one who we respect and one who is wise and who cares for us.

Perhaps you need to sit down with a coffee in hand, and share your anxieties.

For Moses, Jethro simply observed him.

He didn't need to ask Moses – he must have seen the exhausted look in Moses' eyes.

He knew that Moses could not keep this lifestyle up for long and it's a story for us all – some of us may feel that life is too big a challenge for us and we want to take it all on our shoulders and we are indestructible. But let this story speak to us, that even a man like Moses was feeling the strain, and if he feels the strain, lesser mortals like ourselves will also feel the strain.

So, listen to others and learn how to put new structures into our lives.

Nothing will change until we make a conscious effort to restructure how we do things. If we don't we will go back to default position.

A new structure is a framework for us to cope with life. Perhaps there are things that we need to give up, things we need to prioritise.

What are the really essential things in our lives; what things do we have to do that are totally required from us, and what things can other people do to share the burden or take the load?

Moses listened, he reassessed what he was doing, and he put Jethro's words into action.

From Exodus today, we learn that there are three steps that can change our lives.

1. Stop and Listen
2. Take advice and reassess our situation and make a structure for our life.
3. Put it into action

What I love about the character Jethro is that he appears to me as a man of character. He was a Midianite priest and Moses respected him. When he arrives, he listens to Moses. He lets Moses share his successes. He asks Moses what is going well and he praises Moses for his accomplishment. So Moses is now in a position to listen to Jethro, and to respect his views, so come the next day, when Jethro says to Moses *now stop and listen to me, let me tell you what I'm seeing*. Moses is willing to submit to Jethro, and learn from the wisdom of this wise man.

I hope today that this story brings you encouragement, and that it points you also to Jesus who told his disciples to come and follow him.

In those days that meant literally follow behind a rabbi on the road. They would follow and listen to him but Jesus always challenged them not just to be followers but to be doers, and so after his famous Sermon on the Mount he said to them, *whoever puts my words into practice is like a wise man who built his house on a rock - when the storms came the house stood still*.

May we also put Jesus' words into practice?

May we stop and listen? Reassess and restructure and put them into practice.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Amen.