

God's Promises and Commands

24/10/2020

Our two readings today focus on God's promises and commands; both are extremely familiar passages. We pray that as we think about them now the Spirit draws us closer in our understanding of God's word.

For the first part of today's reflection I want to focus on Deuteronomy 34, verses 1-12, recounting the Death of Moses. As with any passage different things will jump out at each of us. For me the passage is about God's fulfilled promises, His timing, and His preparation. We are reminded right at the beginning of this chapter that God is fulfilling a long-made promise to his people, made to Abraham over 400 years before. He repeated it to Isaac, and to Jacob: while it must have felt like it to many, He had not forgotten. Finally, here, its fulfilment is imminent, and Moses gets to glimpse that fulfilment. God's timing is not our timing; God has a bigger picture: of the whole, universal creation, and we must trust that fulfilment of God's promises comes at exactly the right moment. Inevitably too, then, this passage is about preparation: the fulfilment couldn't happen until everything was in place: Moses was kept strong until his task was completed: "his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone", even at 120! Joshua was ready for the handover – the necessary preparation has happened, God had him in place for this moment. And no one like Moses had ever been seen again: if we think back over his period leading God's people we remember the extraordinary events that have made him exactly the right person to have enabled this moment to finally arrive. What's more, he and his leadership have been witnessed by all of God's people. God's preparation has been perfect.

I enjoy looking at pictures of Bible stories, because each artist brings their own perspective, their own viewpoint to a story, which can add to our own understanding and appreciation.

When I have read or heard this story of Moses' death before I have often heard a focus on the sadness and disappointment that we assume Moses felt, having only got to see the Promised Land, and never to have actually set foot on it, after all that he has done for God and his people over many years.



This first picture (1) 'Moses sees the promised land from afar', by James Tissot 1901, highlights this for me: there is a sense of a vast expanse, of distance, into which we can feel his loss and separation; Moses' hand above his eyes reinforces that distance, that his view from here isn't good.

The second picture (2) is a fresco from the Sistine Chapel, painted by Bartolomea della Gatta and Luca Signorelli in the 15th century. It is called Moses' Testament and Death. I hope it is not too small for you to see; in it are included the later moments in the life of Moses. On the right sits the hundred-and-twenty-year-old Moses raised up, holding his staff and with golden rays circling his head. At his feet, here, stands the ark of the Covenant, opened to show the jar of manna inside and the two tablets of the law. In the left half of the picture Joshua is appointed Moses's successor. Joshua kneels in front of Moses, who gives him his staff. In the centre of the background we see Moses being led by the angel of the Lord up Mount Nebo, from which he will be able to look across to the Promised Land that -by the will of God- he will never enter. At the foot of the mountain we see him again, turning toward the left. His death is seen in the background, in the land of Moab, after which the children of Israel mourned him for thirty days. I love the way these significant moments have all been included in this single work, highlighting key



moments of his witness to the people, reinforcing for them what is most necessary for us to remember: the promises, the preparation, the commands, the sense of timing. We get a very different take on the story, then, from the third picture (3),



Marc Chagall's 1958 etching *The Death of Moses*, which is one from his extensive Bible series. This is highly personal work, underlining the importance to him of his Jewish heritage, and that personal relationship between God and Moses here is what is so striking: both seem to be reaching out to one another; the figure of God seems to be acknowledging Moses and affirming him; for me there is no loss here: there is acceptance and 'rightness': of those fulfilled promises; and of timing.

Our second reading comes from Matthew's gospel, chapter 22. This is the latest in a series of challenges that Jesus has faced by a body of religious men determined to trip him up. We have seen him over and over again come up with answers that have surprised and silenced; those leftfield responses that leave his attackers with no counter move. If they can get him to choose one of the commandments as the greatest, then surely he is undermining the others, and therefore the Law more widely. But we have heard his answer: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your

mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'".

Let us go back to those commandments, brought down from the mountain by Moses. They can be found in Exodus chapter 20, verses 1-17. What are they all about? The first four are about honouring God; acknowledging exactly who he is and giving him his worth: they are about worship. Putting time aside for him; putting him first. They are, indeed, about loving God, with all our hearts, souls and minds. And what about the second group? They speak into our families, our communities, respecting and honouring our human relationships and ensuring that they function with integrity: they are, these ones, about loving our neighbours as ourselves. In summarising the 10 commandments into 2, Jesus has answered the question without undermining the importance of any. By honouring God and one another we keep all of the 10 commandments in one go.

Love is a funny old word to define, however, and I sometimes think that Moses' tablets are more practical and user-friendly for us as a model than the word 'love', which has perhaps lost some of its impact through its use.

In the 21st century western world the word love is most associated with romantic love or the one-to-one love of personal relationships. But for us it's also about where we place ourselves with others with whom we're *not* so familiar, as expressed in this graffiti (4); or the love in a community that inspired this wall mural, depicting people sharing a pot-luck meal (5).



So what is love: for God, and for each other? I bring you now to the famous passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, that is so often read at weddings. This passage speaks of far more, however, than the love between just two people in an intimate relationship, and is much more challenging when we consider extending it to our communities, and beyond. As we go through each of these points, highlighted by Paul to that troublesome bunch of people in Corinth, think about how difficult each one is for you within your friends and family, your church, and the wider world:

From 1 Corinthians 13 vs4-8: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.⁸ Love never fails."

God demands that we love Him, and that we love our fellow people. Sometimes that – as commands go - seems so easy, but at other times, when we take on the full implications, it seems nearly impossible. Returning to the wisdom of the Bible: to the promises God has made and kept over and over again to his people, to Moses and his commandments; to Jesus cutting across the challenges of his persecutors, to Paul guiding the early church in Corinth: we can trust in God's promises to us; we are being prepared and readied to be in the right place at the right time; his timing may confuse or amuse us, but it is right; and all we have to do is go back to those commandments: love the lord our god with all our heart, soul and mind, and love each other as we love ourselves.

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