**29th October 2023
Deuteronomy 34.1-12
Matthew 22.34-46

 Moses – a Liminal Figure**

**Introduction to the theme**: **A Liminal Figure**

About four weeks ago I enjoyed a lunch with some colleagues at a Farm Shop. I noticed the array of pumpkins and Halloween gifts already on display as we entered, and I realised the change from summer to autumn had begun.

And here we are on the final Sunday of October with Halloween on Tuesday, All Saints Day on Wednesday, followed by All Souls on Thursday. For many this is the season of remembrance as we recall those who today dwell in a greater light and upon another shore. So, how fitting then, that one of the suggested readings for today takes us to Deuteronomy 34 and the death of Moses.

The Torah, or Pentateuch, is the first five books of the Jewish scriptures and Deuteronomy brings it to a close. Moses is a key figure in Israel’s story, often thought of as her premier prophet and his narrative covers four of those five books. After all he had led the people for over 40 years.

The passage that we’ll hear in a moment describes Moses as undimmed in sight with an unimpaired vigour, even though he was 120 years old, and that sounds like an outstanding doctor’s report. Yet, this was the moment of his passing.

There’s no doubt that he wanted to go on, at least to enter the Promised Land, but that was not to be. It was all so tantalisingly close; indeed, he could see it but not enter it.

Deuteronomy 34 brings the story of Moses to a close. His was a life inextricably intertwined with The Exodus and the escape from Egypt followed by a whole generation living that nomadic wilderness life searching out the Promised Land. It was to be the next generation, however, under Joshua, who would make the subsequent leg of history and enter Caanan establishing a home there. All of this belongs to a time around 3,000 years ago – the repercussions of which are still arguably, and tragically going on today.

So, Moses is this liminal, in between like figure.

For all that the people, with whom he’d sometimes had a difficult relationship, mourned his passing for 30 days. They honoured his memory not by building a memorial to him but by continuing to tell the stories about him. He lived on in their national memory and narrative.

So, as we enter this season of remembrance maybe today’s story from the Jewish Scriptures opens important themes for us about life and death, themes that affect us all.

**Sermon: Filling his chapter to the full**
*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ,
the Living Word. So, in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.*

Historians, as they analyse monarchs and politicians, often ponder their legacy. After the inconsequential has faded and been edited out, what will be remembered? Ethelred was unready, Ivan was terrible, and Florence Nightingale had a lamp, even though I’m sure there was so much more to them than that.

The final verses of our Old Testament reading have a go at giving us Moses’ legacy, indeed they are the final verses of Deuteronomy, so they bring the Torah to a close.

Verse 10: *There has never yet risen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, remember the signs he showed in Egypt and the awesome deeds which he did in the sight of all Israel.*
There is no doubt that Moses belongs to the past, even if the future will be built by Joshua upon his predecessor’s achievements.

His spiritual life is rightly celebrated first, in that he knew God face to face. What a statement! Moses was a man of deep belief and conviction, all of it based on a personal spirituality in which an encounter with God seemed so real.

He's then celebrated for his bravery in standing up to Pharaoh in the palace he once lived. At the very moment when an enslaved people needed to find a voice, they were given Moses who spoke up for them presenting truth unto power.

And lastly, even though he often berated them and became frustrated by their faithlessness in the wilderness, Moses is honoured for those 40 years of tough leadership he ceaselessly gave to a wandering nation without a home.

Of course with such a glowing resume we might have thought that the last verses of the Torah should have read: *So Moses entered the Promised Land, and now with his journey ended, he died and Joshua took over.*

Instead, he saw it but never crossed over into it.

So, was this an unfinished, incomplete life?

I’m not sure that would a fair assessment of Moses.

It is, in some ways, a mystery why he falls, as it were at the last hurdle. We know there was that incident at Meribah when he strikes a rock twice before a spring opened in the dessert. It’s an ambiguous moment. Did it mean in some way that he was taking credit for this divine intervention and as a result he was stopped from finally reaching Caanan? Or was he a sort of Suffering Servant figure, carrying the flaws of a whinging generation who had not travelled well through the wilderness. He, ultimately, is being so identified with this chapter of history that he simply wasn’t to be part of the next. Instead, he died with this generation and left it to the next one to make a permanent home.

So, he dies in Moab, a visitor just passing through.

Maybe there doesn’t have to be reason and Moses’ life is like all our lives, we have a season, and we inhabit a chapter. Maybe we would all like more time, especially when life seems cut short. Maybe we would have cherished another job or assignment, we didn’t feel ready to stop travelling or that it was our time to become physically frail. So maybe no life ever really seems complete and all of us, even premier prophets, live with disappointments and die with unfulfilled dreams.

Yet, the Torah comes to an end celebrating all that Moses had achieved. A spiritual life, a courageous life and a consistent life. He fills the chapter in which he lived, and the people wept for 30 days because he was gone.

And, interestingly, our Jewish cousins, once they finish these final verses of Deuteronomy 34, they start the cycle all over again and begin with Genesis. So, it’s as if they too live in this liminal, in between state, and along with Moses never enter Caanan; instead, they continue to travel hopefully living in the now and the not yet at one and the same time.

I once did a piece of work at Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes. The church with the second biggest dome after St Pauls, in the country. A church that met in the city’s library until their new home was ready. Canon David Goldie, who helped lead and take the church from library to new build, said there were some in the congregation who loved travelling hopefully, they loved being a wilderness congregation without a permanent home, they loved the longing and working together, and once they were installed, these members left – he said. For them, the journey was everything.

In the end that was the calling of Moses – he led the journey. He got them there. And he inhabits this chapter, not the next one, but this one, with exemplary faithfulness.

Now I want to draw this talk to a close by noting the verse that says no one knows where the grave of Moses is located.

Yet that is never seen as either important or ever viewed as a problem.

Our society has, perhaps, in previous generations put up rather too many statues, only to have succeeding generations question their validity and worthiness.

So, what was, or is Moses’ memorial? Isn’t it the stories? The stories of his faith. The stories of his failures. This blend of all the stories that keeps his memory alive and his life honoured.

The other day I listened to a brilliant talk given by a New Zealand priest on the language of liturgy. His point was that liturgy is just as much about colour, music, silence, buildings, smells, and movement as it ever is about words, even if words are important. He rather playfully said that in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus says DO this in remembrance of me – he doesn’t say turn to pages 47 -51 in the red service book and read this about me. We’re called to break the bread and pour out the wine – and the actions tell the story – just as Jesus gave himself so completely for us, broken and poured out, that’s how we are called to both remember him and then live for him. For we are commissioned to live *like* him. And in this way the stories of Jesus live again.

At a recent thanksgiving service here at AFC a grandson paid tribute to all the love and encouragement his grandfather had shown him by saying just as granddad used to walk with his hands behind his back, the grandson, inadvertently had found himself walking exactly the same way; hands behind his back.

In some wonderful way part of the grandfather’s character lives on in the grandson’s life. What better memorial would any grandad want.

And so we are told in today’s reading, Joshua, Son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands upon him. The Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses.

Today, on this the Sunday closest to All Saints Day, we’ll end our service with a hymn whose last line goes; *From earth’s wide bound, from ocean’s farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host and sing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Alleluia.*

We fill our chapter, for whatever time is given to us, others have gone before, and some will follow after – we are part of this cycle of life, and we all make a story. Moses to Joshua, the story of the Torah. Jesus to The Church, the story of the New Testament.

Today, you will be thinking of those who walked alongside you through part of your chapter, and those who will complete their own once you are gone. For, we in some marvellous way, complete each other’s lives.

Past, present, and future, somehow held together in one story of Love.

Today, as grief and joy mingle together, may we find strength to be part of that story and both write and live our chapter with faith, trust and love, in the name of God. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 28th October 2023*