



Deut 4.1-2, 6-9
Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23
29th August 2021

The Questioning Life

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME

Moses was buried in an unmarked grave. Seems a little inadequate for such a giant in the Jewish story of Exodus.

Yet, in the narrative, it was always going to be this way. He would never cross the Jordan. He would never enter the Promised Land.

Not that he was alone. He belongs to the Wilderness Generation. Those who made rather a hash of the journey from Egypt to Canaan. Their faith waivered more than might have been expected. Their actions showed a surprising lack of appreciation for God's provision. And because of this fragility of trust, and sometimes lack of faith, like Moses, they didn't quite reach Journey's End.

Perhaps, like me, you scratch your head a little and wonder if this story isn't just a bit too severe. After all, 'messing things up' didn't stop the Prodigal from returning home and receiving an undeserved welcome, or for the Woman at The Well, who had a past that made her ashamed to be out in society, to be accepted by Jesus as he asked her for a drink. And if it's true that faith as small as grain of mustard seed is enough, then surely a fragile faith is not to be sneezed at.

Yet Moses, without rancour, seems to understand his part in the narrative stops here. So, the passage, read from Deuteronomy just now, is part of his Swan Song and it's in praise of the Jewish Law. The Law he received on Mount Sinai and the code of belief and ethics which, he considered, would fundamentally make Israel distinctive amongst its neighbours. This Law, centred in a belief in

one God, was to become part of the nation's DNA, not for rule keeping's sake, but to infuse the nation with God's characteristics of love and justice.

I suspect that laws, the making of them and their keeping, doesn't always get a good press among us today.

Moses, according to today's reading from the Jewish scriptures, didn't see it like that when it came to the Torah.

Maybe it's because he felt guilty that his cohort, The Wilderness Generation, had broken too many of them, that he urges those who will follow him, those who will cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land, to value these laws.

Laws that teach worship, establish norms, place limits on war, ordain a just economy and create a framework for communal care.

So, he says, repeat them. Repeat them. Repeat them!

That's part of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. We constantly seek to remind ourselves of deep truths about God and community that have stood the test of time. We do this in our lectionary readings, in the seasonal hymns we sing and regular celebration of communion we share. God is love. His ways are just. People are made in his image. These are truths worth repeating and living by. Ideas that have gotten into our soul and characterise our DNA.

Well, that, I think, is Moses' take on The Law.

In a few moments we'll be asking if Jesus thought the same way too?

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, I guess we all know a thing or two about washing our hands, or at least sanitising them. Eighteen months ago, the advice went out that we should scrub them for as long as it takes to sing God Save the Queen or Happy Birthday.

A few years ago, whilst officiating at Communion in St Michael's, I met the practice of being offered a bowl of water and a small towel to be used before I broke the bread or lifted the chalice.

In today's gospel Jesus is accused by the religious authorities of setting a bad example and being a law breaker. For it had been observed that he and his disciples did not always wash their hands in a ritual manner before eating a meal.

Now, it's not really clear what is being referred to here. Did Jesus and the twelve have a blatant disregard for the usual conventions of the day or, as others have suggested, were they being accused by extremists who had set the bar so high that very few ever really made it?

Mark is quite the provocateur. He's got the bit between his teeth and makes a big deal of this incident, both the accusation and Jesus' response. For Mark it's a seminal moment. Whereas Matthew downplays it, and Luke, well he simply ignores it all together.

Jewish law often covered the most practical and down to earth of situations. There were food laws that clearly addressed how to maintain hygiene in a hot country without fridges. Those laws today make less sense than when first set down.

Then there were, and are, liturgical laws that regulated worship, roles in temple life and practises for individual spirituality.

And, as time goes by and we move from one Testament to another, there was the multiplication of rules. Schools of scribes spent their careers codifying and supposedly clarifying rules. A tradition that

became a burden. Too many rules. Too complicated. Too obtuse.

This possible over-emphasis and over production of rules begs the question what they were for in the first place? What's the point of Torah?

It was all about God's revelation, God's guidance and teaching for humankind. And as we've said already this morning, the Jewish Law reflected God's character of love and justice.

It was for everyone's good health, spiritually and physically. Body, mind, and spirit. There is a 'whole person' spirituality in something like the Ten Commandments with no distinction between what we might label sacred and secular – God is part of all of life.

And these laws, especially about worship, gave the nation an identity grounded in God. God was their firm foundation.

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, the wise and influential American teacher priest, Barbara Brown Taylor reflects on just how special it was to attend a Jewish meal with a cohort of her students from a World Faiths' class. For her a really moving moment came at its beginning as, in this instance, symbolically they took a ball of cotton wool and washed one another's hands. She said, this wasn't legalism but fellowship, which provided a truly touching moment in the evening they spent together. She also said having had that experience, she sort of understood the critics viewpoint in today's gospel.

Yet it's also true that Jesus wasn't the first preacher to detect that religious ritual and law keeping could, on occasions, become a substitute for a compassionate life.

Amos, one of the minor prophets of the Jewish scriptures and writing just over 700 years before Jesus, at the same time as Isaiah, is best known for this call to live an ethical and authentic life.

Chapter 5 of his book is perhaps the best-known part of his message in which he describes God as being offended by all our singing, rituals and law keeping if we then ignore the poor and push out the marginalised.

To use a much more modern saying it's something like being so *heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use*.

So, Jesus is being accused here as falling short in keeping the hand washing laws of the Torah, and in doing so, he becomes *unclean*.

Perhaps it is just a tad ironic that of all people Jesus seemed to enjoy being around those called *unclean* just about the most.

He purposefully drew alongside those with dreaded skin diseases. He went out of his way to spend time with women and children, some of whom had histories which meant they were temple excluded. And, in the narrative of his birth, the very announcement of his incarnation was made to unclean shepherds. Men whose hands were constantly dirty due to the nature of the job. Men, consequently barred from ritualistic worship but given a ringside seat that first Christmas night.

Not that Jesus was against ritual and tradition, when practised with a sincere heart, open to both God and others. On the night of his last Passover, he himself, wrapped in a towel, took a bowl of water, and washed his disciples' feet – an act not too dissimilar from that described by Barbara Brown Taylor. An act of servant love. An act that bound a community together in mutual respect and deep hearted fellowship.

And that is probably what is at the heart of why Jesus upset the pedantic law keepers so often. They seemed to view laws as a way of setting concrete boundaries. Laws that decreed whether a person was in or out, one of us or someone 'other'. Jesus, like Amos before him, saw laws as essentially keeping the community safe and whole. The law, these religious laws like the Ten

Commandments, puts obligations on me that also protect you. And that has been a debate we've often needed to hear these last seventeen months.

I was intrigued to read the prayer said by The Speaker's Chaplain everyday in the House of Commons before the day's business starts. It's language is old but it's desire could not be more relevant, it prays for Members of Parliament that they, and here I quote: *never lead the nation wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideals but laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all humankind; so may your kingdom come and your name be hallowed.*

A prayer seeking that the laws made in parliament may be for the good of all.

Jesus asks us to question why we do things. What's behind our actions? Do external rituals matter to us more than internal good intentions?

It's never easy to live the questioning life. At times it's much simpler to hang on the rigid certainties learnt by rote from childhood.

Yet, the way of every good teacher, the rabbinical method of Judaism and the example of Jesus in Christianity, is that we work hard at digging deeper, perhaps even rather irritatingly asking the question: why? It's the way every child was brought up and it's the way every Passover begins with the youngest in the room asking *what they are remembering on this special night?*

I remember, a year or two back, listening to a fascinating interview on Radio 4 between John Humphreys and the controversial radical Anglican priest Giles Fraser. Humphreys made a somewhat glib statement about observing rather contented and happy churchgoers as if everyone in the pew had successfully found the key to life.

Giles Frasier, in my view, made the more thoughtful comment, that in his experience, people in the pews of churches are those who come week by week with needs and sit with questions. And in this state of very much feeling like a 'work in progress' we turn to God and find an acceptance that brings a certain wholeness and deeper definition to life.

We live the questioning life, in the sincere hope that, with Jesus as our guide, we might discover the true essence of life.

May it be so, in the name of him who taught us that the fulfilment of the greatest law was to love both God and neighbour. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 19th July 2021