**11th August 2019**

**Deuteronomy 4.1-14 Luke 12.32-40**

Fear is a natural human response when we don’t know what the future holds, where we are going or where our needs will be met. We explore those issues in our readings today and also next week. Our Bible notes (published by IBRA) that many people in the church use will be looking at the book of Deuteronomy over the next two weeks, chapters 1-11. This is the fifth and final book in the Jewish Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, known as the books of the law because they detail how God chose a people to bring his message to the world, how God rescued those people from slavery in Egypt under Moses, and how God led them to the Promised Land .

God’s initiative and promise take pride of place in Deuteronomy. It is God who challenges the people’s fears and it is God who proceeds and provides for the people the Promised Land.

Although written in the first person, most scholars don’t believe that Moses actually wrote it, it details his death for one, but that it was a reflection on the ancient traditions of Israel and how they entered into the Promised Land and need to get their attitudes and values right in order to create the society that followed the way of God. Most scholars think it was written at a time when exiled Jews were returning from exile in Babylon and reminding them of the past and giving them inspiration for the kind of society they would reconstruct on arriving back in their homeland.

In a world where there is so much choice, so many options, the weight of decision often rest on our shoulders. Freedom is a precious thing but can also paralyse you. A couple of generations ago you knew you were likely to work at the local factory or go down the local pit. If you were a woman you would have children and become a housewife. I speak in simplistic terms, but times then were simpler. Choice was a luxury. Now we are fed on the mantra that we can be who we want to be? We are free to choose our vocation, our direction in life. Exciting, but also fearful. In a world without God, each decision sits with us.

Results days for those waiting in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, has A-level results announced on 15 August and GCSEs shortly after on 22 August. Months and years of hard work will have gone into preparing for the exams, then months of waiting for the results.

How does waiting feel, not knowing what the outcome will be?

Exam results and qualifications can seem like a ‘treasure’ to be chased after, but it is worth remembering, especially for those who are getting results for themselves, that whatever the outcome, exam results are just one small part of your life. Good or bad, they don’t define you or your future, however much it may feel like it at the time. Hold on instead to the promise that you are a beloved and precious child of God, an heir to the kingdom – that is where your true treasure and future lies.

What Deuteronomy invites us to see is life in the light of God’s promises. This changes the game entirely. God goes before the people and prepares the way; their response is to be obedient. Another word for that is TRUST[[1]](#endnote-1)

Life isn’t simply about finding our purpose, but rather it is hearing how we fit in with God’s mission in the world and being in a trusting relationship with the God who created the world . Life isn’t about trying to be loved, to make your way, to be someone: it is realizing that you are already loved by the God who created you, the God who is with you and from that security fulfilling your calling to love and serve others.

In our contemporary culture people are put on pedestals and idolized. However, it seems that in God’s economy leaders are not called to be heroes but rather servants. Moses is one the biggest figures in the Bible. Yet in chapter one he displays a great amount of vulnerability in the admission that he can’t bear the heavy burden of the people’s disputes all on his own. The solution is to create a team of leaders, each of whom has a particular role, especially in ensuring God’s justice is done. The leadership modelled by Moses seeks not to exercise power but rather to serve God’s purposes in the world. Bearing the burden alone will cause us to boast or bust but bearing it together will bear fruit for God’s kingdom and for his glory. We are all called to collective responsibility and teamwork.

In chapter two Moses is called by God to lead the Israelites through the desert, avoiding the locals.

We live in an age of distraction. Mobile phones are constantly pinging and demanding our attention or are an easy temptation to be lost in trivia. We have emails and texts at our fingertips, full schedules and 101 good things to do before teatime. It isn’t often we pause to pray and take time to figure out what it is we really ought to give our time to.

In chapter two you get the picture of the Israelites wandering through the desert and being prompted by God not to start skirmishes with the locals. God asks them to bypass various tribes and peoples because God has given land to these peoples. The Israelites are meant to be a light to the nations and God has called them to represent God to the world. They are not to be distracted with their own projects or agendas. This passage invites us to think about first things first and to focus on who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do. Issues of purpose and significance are first order principles. Get them right and the rest of your life falls in line. Sometimes it takes time apart to pray and reflect on these matters. Collectively as businesses, institutions, churches – you need to know what are you there for? We will need to ask ourselves those questions once we have refurbished the upper hall and the floors of the Parsonage. What does God want us to do with that space?

It is a big question, that many people stew over: ‘Am I living God’s will for my life?’ In Deuteronomy we do get a glimpse of the dynamic of following God’s lead and how God’s plan unfolds. Sihon the Amorite king stands in the way of the Israelite people getting to the promised land. It looks rather bleak for the Israelites, but God intervenes once again. Right through the story from the Exodus it is God who is the main character. God who goes before the people, God who gives the land, God who makes Sihon’s heart hard. The Lord hands over the King but the people need to go out and fight and take possession. There is the dance of the God’s will and plan together with the responsibility and obedience of the people. There is a lot of truth in the old saying ‘God helps those who help themselves’ – though I would add a few clauses about being sensitive to God’s ways and not getting too caught up in your own agenda.

Joshua Taylor in the Bible notes suggest that discerning God’s will is less like waiting for a train to arrive at the station and more like being on a tandem bicycle. If you have ever done that you know it requires good communication. The other year I went canoeing with my family. I was in a canoe with my wife and we couldn’t get ourselves co-ordinated and working together. We went round and round in circles, crashed into bridges and in the end, I ended up falling in the river. Good communication and someone knowing what they are doing and taking authority was called for. A model shown by Moses and God.

In chapter three we see the cost of leadership though. Moses labours and leads the people of God through the wilderness and many trials. The people grumble and wish they were back in slavery in Egypt. They are so ungrateful and come to doubt that God has a good and prefect will for them. They question whether God will provide, and that Moses knows what he is doing.

The term FOMO means Fear Of Missing Out – it is the anxiety that something great is happening and we are missing it. Some people won’t commit to going to an event because to do that means they could miss out on what they regard as a better offer. The Israelites are anxious about entering the Promised Land and won’t commit. Moses is one of the most persistent petitioners of God in the Bible and it seems he has talked with God about the matter of entering the Promised Land more than once. In chapter 3.26 God says ‘enough from you! Never speak to me of this matter again! We are told that Moses won’t enter the land because of God’s anger with the people. Here we see Moses absorbing the punishment the people deserve for their fear and anxiety. None of the people really deserve to enter the land – fear has got the better of them. They will eventually, although Moses won’t lead them, but his successor Joshua will.

Although disappointed with this Moses still has the great treasure of deep intimacy and relationship with God. That is the true treasure which we don’t want to miss out on. Everything else is a lesser treasure, a lesser ambition.

No earthly king’s golden glories can compete with the unfailing treasure of the kingdom of God.

80 years ago, in 1939, an excavation in Suffolk uncovered one of Britain’s archaeological wonders, the [Sutton Hoo ship burial](https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo). This week its custodian, the National Trust, has unveiled new exhibition halls and opened up a fresh route around the site.

A much more ancient treasure has also been receiving fresh attention this week: [Tutankhamun’s golden coffin](https://twitter.com/AntiquitiesOf/status/1158031777899982848), which was first discovered in the 1920s but dates back to around 1324BC. It has been removed from his tomb in the Valley of Kings, Egypt, for the [first time since its discovery](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-7323371/Tutankhamuns-gold-gilded-sarcophagus-leaves-pharaohs-tomb-time-97-years.html), for restoration under the care of the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities.

Treasure. When you hear the word, what image does it conjure in your mind? Tutankhamun’s golden grave goods. King Raedwald’s funereal mound at Sutton Hoo[[2]](#endnote-2)

Those two buried kings – Egyptian and Anglo-Saxon – took all kinds of things with them to their graves, probably in the hope of securing a comfortable, safe, even glorious afterlife. But such treasures aren’t eternal. Tutankhamun’s ‘coffin has suffered a lot of damage. The Sutton Hoo iron helmet is left in pieces and – whatever its original strength and splendour – would do little to protect a royal warrior now.

Material things, however splendid, beautiful, useful, necessary, or well made, will always fail us in the end. Yet throughout Luke 12 Jesus’ message is that we need not fear the frailty of our bodies or the loss of earthly things, ‘for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom’ (Luke 12.32). God’s gift of eternal life and love is worth much more than anything on earth. It is an ‘unfailing treasure’ (Luke 12.33).

So, with such a precious gift promised to us, how should we respond? By keeping our sights and hearts set on the kingdom, despite the abundance of glittering distractions that might surround us, or the hardships we might face in waiting.

A recent report[[3]](#endnote-3) suggests that cancer ‘battle talk’ could have a negative effect on some people’s experience. That battle metaphors such as ‘fighting cancer’, being attacked or invaded could generate fear and fatalism in some people. That they also put a lot of pressure on people to be brave, a warrior and a survivor, when they may find it difficult to manage permanent positivity or feel even worse because they fear letting the side down.

Deuteronomy speaks of a God who encourages the people not to fear because I am with you. It is the promise for divine presence come what may which is the source of inner security and peace.

Jesus encourages his little flock – then and now – to stay ‘alert’ and focused, like the faithful slaves awaiting their master’s return in the parable (Luke 12.25-38), who stay awake and ready right through until dawn. Yes, waiting can be difficult but the master knows this – so much so that when he finally comes back, he is even willing to serve those who should serve him. And how awe-inspiring is that? In contrast to the kings of earth with all their power and gold, our God, our unfailing treasure, is a servant king!

In Deuteronomy 4 there is the warning not to forget God delivered them from slavery and gave the Israelites a new law to live by that will ensure they are never slaves again, nor enslave each other. ‘*Do not forget the things you have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live’* says Moses in verse 9.

Keep those memories of God speaking and acting fresh so that you will not be distracted by false idols. Know the Lord is with you, whatever dangers and fears you face.

1. Joshua Taylor, IBRA Bible Notes 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rebecca Foley, <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/102-july-august-2019-c/proper-14/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/aug/10/war-cancer-metaphors-harm-research-shows> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)