**18th August 2019**

**Deuteronomy 11.1-21, Luke 12.49-56**

We have had plenty of rain in the last couple of weeks. A typical English summer we may say. It has been a break in between showers. Always go out with a coat or an umbrella – just in case. In other parts of the world of course there is a lack of rain and eco systems are collapsing and shortages are of concern. Much attention has been had in recent months about the effect of the human impact on climate change on the excess of rain and the shortage of rain in some places. If so, we are experiencing the consequences of our wrong actions in the way we have treated the world. Certainly [Greta Thunberg](https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg) who set sail to New York,  among others, are arguing that we are failing to take effective action over climate change.

Quite often in life something happens to us and we wonder whether we are to blame. Why has this happened to me? People often wonder whether God is punishing them. Why have you O God brought this upon me?

The Old Testament assumes a link between the way Israel, the people of God live and the way its life works out. Elsewhere it can speak of the ‘natural link’ between our actions and the positive or negative consequences; here it emphasizes the way God is involved in the processes.

People listening to Deuteronomy being read know that they sometimes do experience drought and failure of harvest and they have listened to prophets telling them that is not mere chance; God withholds the rain to bring them to their senses. They also know there is no one to one correspondence between faithfulness and blessing or between faithlessness and trouble. Sometimes a drought is just a drought; the rain falls and the sun shines on the faithful and the faithless. But when the drought comes, it is always worth asking whether it results from human action.

We live in a consequential universe. We face the consequences of our behavior and actions in a moral universe. That doesn’t necessarily translate to other spheres of life though. If I smoke 60 cigarettes a day, I am likely to get lung cancer. The occurrence of other cancers can just seem random, part of the breakdown in creation – these things happen without any blame. It is not right and far too simplistic to automatically start the blame game. Though in all situations of life there needs to be robust soul searching: what could I have done differently – what can I do differently.

Sometimes there are hard decisions to make and divisions are inevitable.

In today’s Gospel Jesus asks, ‘Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?’ and speaks of dividing families. This is difficult teaching, but we do a disservice if we try to smooth over the issues.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Division is always uncomfortable whether in and between families or in and between countries.

However, the truth is that sometimes hard choices have to be made and sometimes division becomes inevitable.

There are, of course, ways of expressing our differences which are as kind as possible – and ways which are brutal. Sometimes we may be called to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4.15). Christians are called to love both God and our neighbour, and to do that sometimes we need to make a stand, for example, against injustice or discrimination or hypocrisy.

It is intriguing that Jesus’ hard words about division are followed by criticism of those who cannot read the signs of the times. How do we read the signs of our times? Jesus seems to be attacking those who only notice the small details and miss the big picture, those who cannot see the wood for the trees. In our cantankerous society, are many of us missing the real big picture?

The importance of rain makes it a fitting symbol of blessing. Blessing and belittling refer both to words and to experiences. God speaks words that promise and commission blessing for people and also speaks words that warn them of trouble or bring trouble about. Belittling or cursing suggest cutting them down to size in words and thus in reality.

When Abraham arrived in Canaan, God appeared to him by the oak at Moreh near the city of Shechem, the modern-day Nablus, in the center of the country and for the first time promised to give him the country. (Genesis 12.6-7). When the Israelites enter into possession of the country in fulfilment of that promise they will find the city stands between two mountains, which Israel is to turn into places symbolizing the alternatives standing before it.

Blessing suggests fertility. Belittling/cursing suggest the opposite, being cut down to much less than you are and hope to be. Israel chooses its destiny. In setting Abraham on his journey to Shechem, God promised that he would be blessed but also that anyone who tried to belittle him would be belittled. Israel is again reminded that the same principles apply to it as apply to other peoples. It does not get away with things just because it is God’s special people. Choose wisely to live a blessed life, rather than a cursed. Choose to be a blessing rather than a curse.

We all know what it is like to be belittled. Harsh experiences especially in childhood when we are told we are rubbish, never going to succeed, we are a failure – can haunt us and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. God seeks to bless first and foremost. Will we play along with that iniative?

The book of Deuteronomy sometimes feels like one, very long, sermon. It is better understood as a series of distinct speeches, each with its own theme and focus. The speech that begins at Deuteronomy 4.44 is described there as 'the law that Moses set before the Israelites'. These laws begin with the Ten commandments (5.1-21) and are then expounded in more detail with chapter 11 forming a conclusion. Therefore, this text is both a summary and a challenge to the people – will they obey, or will they turn away? This stark alternative is a familiar theme of Deuteronomy (compare with Deuteronomy 26.1-68; 30.1-20) and it is an early example of a form of teaching (commonly known as the idea of the 'two ways') that is commonly found in Jewish wisdom literature (see for example Psalm 1 and the opening chapters of Proverbs) and in the teaching of Jesus and his followers.

The Deuteronomy text is problematic to some degree. The promise of blessing as a reward for obedience is closely allied with Israel's occupation of the land and expulsion of other nations. If we had read other parts of Deuteronomy, Moses says God sanctions genocide, the wiping out of tribes and peoples to cleanse the land so that the Israelites can possess the promised Land. We have chilling violent verses that give the Bible a bad press in certain circles. They seem so un-Christ like! Jesus told us to love our enemies, to do good to those who persecute us. He prayed for forgiveness for those who crucified him. Christ, we believe is the revelation of God, the full revelation of God. What is God truly like? Look to what scripture tells us about Jesus is the Christian response.

Whatever Moses is suggesting here falls deadly short of the vision of God we see in Christ. It is a reminder that the wise Christ-centered handling of scripture and its interpretation is an important task of the church and that any organization basing its theology and practice on commands from Deuteronomy needs to be treated with suspicion.

God loves the people he has chosen. Not because they have been faithful – in fact Moses throughout Deuteronomy calls them stiff necked and faithless! God loves them through grace – something they haven’t earned or deserved!

Can you command love? Powerful rulers in the ancient near east commanded love from their empires and professed to love them in return. A bit like what we see in present day North Korea when Kim Jong Un waves at a balcony for a military parade and the tens of thousands all gush with elation back. We in the west think all that is a bit false and forced. Scholars typically relate the love of God in Deuteronomy to this kind of treaty or covenant agreement that was common in the ancient world. We love God with gritted teeth!

At our Reasons for God meeting on Thursday I was asked whether people ever come to faith through argument. The answer is not likely. I think we worship God with all our heart, all our mind, all your strength and al our soul – so I think its important that we think through our faith and the reasons for it – it is hard to love God with you heart if your mind has problems. But most people come to faith because they have been emotionally moved by an experience of the love of God. They have a change of heart. Their hearts are strangely warmed, as John Wesley described it. So, until we realize that God loves us, passionately loves us, loves us so much he’d die on a cross for us – then we are unlikely to love back in the same way and just say we love through gritted teeth.

Overall, however, the focus of the text is on the choice that, at the end of Moses' sermon, the Israelites are challenged to make. For those who choose the way of blessing, verses 18-21 show that obedience to God's commands is not simply a matter of external behaviour, but of inward disposition. The law has its place first and foremost in the heart and soul (v. 18) and is to shape the life of the nation to the extent that its teaching is passed from one generation to the next (11.19-21).

Nathan Eddy in the IBRA bible notes on Deuteronomy for this week suggests that even among churchgoing Christians, the kind of scripture familiarity described in this reading is rare. The presence of scripture in daily life – having it on your hand and doorposts, in your heart and soul and perhaps memory – is, in Deuteronomy, not just for religious professionals but for ordinary people.

Memorizing scripture is out of fashion, but it is a gift that keeps on giving. He says even committing a single verse to memory is like eating a slow release energy bar. Days, months, years later a word will strike you in a new way. Even writing out a verse by hand, either artistically or just on a piece of paper tucked in your Bible, helps commit it to memory.

The kind of Bible reading is different from reading just for the story. It is a deeper level in which you put the words themselves in your heart, on your hand, between your eyes.

I occasionally write out a verse and pin it on my noticeboard just to let it sink in. The promises of scripture can sustain us in hard times. I remember the story of Terry Waite. As an envoy for the [Church of England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_England), he travelled to Lebanon to try to secure the release of four hostages, including the journalist [John McCarthy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_McCarthy_(journalist)). He was himself kidnapped and held captive from 1987 to 1991. He wrote about his time held as a hostage and how the scriptures he had memorized in his earlier life and as part of his spiritual discipleship sustained him during those dark days. Can I encourage you to commit scripture to memory?

When I was a child, I had to memorize certain verses – I know some of the older folk had to learn things like the 23rd Psalm. Wonderful. You never know when it may be helpful. In our distracted and busy world, we need to make time for silence and contemplation of God and God’s message to us.

Back when the telegraph was the fastest method of long-distance communication, a young man applied for a job as a Morse code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the office address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large busy office filled with noise and clatter, including the sound of the telegraph in the background. A sign on the receptionist’s counter instructed the job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man filled out this form and sat down with the seven other applicants in the waiting area. After a few minutes the young man stood up crossed the room to the door of the inner office and walked right in.

Naturally the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. They muttered to themselves that they hadn’t heard any summons yet. They assumed the young man who went into the office made a mistake and would be disqualified.

Within a few minutes, however the employer escorted the young man out of the office and said to the other applicants ‘ladies, gentlemen, than you very much for coming but the job has been filled.’

The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and one spoke up saying, ‘wait a minute, I don’t understand. He was the last to come in, and we never got the chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That’s not fair.’

The employer said, ‘I’m sorry, but all the time you’ve been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse Code: ‘*if you understand this message, then come right in. the job is yours*.’ None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. The job is his.’

We live in a world full of busyness and clatter, like that office. People are distracted and unable to hear the still small voice of God as God speaks in creation, in the scriptures, or in the life and work of Jesus Christ. Are we tuned in to God’s voice? Do we hear God speaking to us? Are we listening? Do we know God’s blessings – because God wants to bless us. Love the Lord with all our heart and soul.

1. *Dudley Coates* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/102-july-august-2019-c/proper-15/postscript*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/102-july-august-2019-c/proper-15/postscript) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)