

Never ending journey

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Imagine, we've been in the desert for 40 years. The original generation are dying out. One by one, those with the memory of Egypt are winking out like stars against a velvet sky.

The 2nd generation have known nothing but the desert. They are hardened and as strong as the hills and rocks that carry them. They are adults with children of their own. The 2nd generation are known as the generation of hope for they do not know the past – they are focused on the future. They are eager to get on with it.

God calls his friend Moses up on the mountain and shows him the land he will never enter. Moses is 120 years old. God has already forewarned him of his coming death, not that one needs reminding when you are 120.

It is not an equal relationship. Moses was disobedient and accepts his fate as a faithful servant. God's law is God's law. Moses is so celebrated in the last lines of the story that we forget he was a sinner. They spoke to each other as friends and in doing so, both changed. When God's sense of justice was on a collision course with God's mercy, who was the small, quiet voice? Moses held the mirror up to God. God used Moses in extraordinary ways. No other prophet will have the same intimate relationship since the Lord spoke to him "face to face" (Num 12:8) – none other until Jesus.¹

Moses dies on command and his body is left behind but his hand is on Joshua – the mantle of wisdom laid on his shoulders. This is a dangerous time of leadership transition; A million things could/would go wrong. The children of Israel are about to enter the Promised Land.

In October, this congregation travelled in the desert with Moses. It has been a month of law.

¹ Jesus is more worthy of more glory than Moses (Heb 3:3)

We examined God's relationship with us and ours with Him by looking closely at Moses.

We looked at the laws both human and spiritual and discussed what and who belongs to whom. Whose law, whose coin, whose son and whose friend?

We have seen Jesus tested 3 times against the law and He confounds the Herodians, the Pharisees and Sadducees. He knows he is setting up the conflict to come. Nothing angers an opponent more than not beating him at his game. Opposition only works when there is push-back. You can't have a one-sided tug of war. Jesus does something new each time. It's a different game – new rules.

And we've looked around and seen God in the faces around us.

We are coming out of our 2020 desert. We are in a dangerous time of leadership transition around the world. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees each side has a history, an orthodoxy and a conviction that God is on their side. The question for us is who is listening to God's law, God's world. How can we be stewards of the earth as we exploit her one powerfully last time to squeeze another dollar before disaster strikes again.

What should the world look like?

And so we move to the Great Commandment. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:4 "You shall love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and with all your strength. And Love your neighbour as yourself. While these two are inseparable, they are not the same. The 2nd is a practical way to express your love of God and it obliquely refers to the 'test' we talked about last week – **trust**.

"Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have *not* seen." (1 Jn 4:20).

Honouring the first commandment and not the 2nd makes us a hypocrite. Trust in the unseen God? Trust in the image of God as reflected in those around us? Treat them as a tangible expression of the first commandment. A big ask.

Time and time again. the Old and New testament texts have a go at the terribly pious. From Isaiah “more than burnt ashes..” to, for example, what Matthew describes as ‘the weightier matters of the law; justice, mercy and faith’. (Matt 23:23). Brueggemann said “Worship, both public and private, becomes the target of prophetic critique when it is divorced from ‘the weightier matters of the law; justice, mercy and faith’².

Equally, the two commandments place another responsibility on us. If we spend so much time in piety that we suffer (or our family suffers), we are not loving or caring for ourselves. Equally, and most chaplains are guilty of this, if we spend so much time in service that we and our families suffer – then we are not honouring God. And often, sadly, not taking time out to be contemplative or pious. It stops being about God and becomes being about us.

Put bluntly, prayer, worship, the aggressive search for truth about God, and serious wrestling with issues of faith are essential to meeting the first requirement – with all your heart, your soul and **your mind**. That means you are required to inquire – to use your mind – not just memorise passages.

Jesus was an amazing interpreter of the law. Moses had it easy. Jesus inherited the Act, Statutes, Regs and rules – and they represented the history of the law from Moses to Jesus’ ‘modern’ times. The existence of the Pharisees and Sadducees and yes, even the Samaritans showed that there was not agreement on how to apply ancient, inherited law. Different interpretations. Different responses. Jesus synthesised and reduced much of the controversy to a radical form; cleansed of politics. He declared that these two laws were the key and yardstick to understanding *all* law or measuring law against mercy.

Brueggemann said, ‘what is owed to God and Neighbour is not the carrying out of a specific law but a total approach to life.’ This is a difficult road to follow.

Paul says in his letter, not all has been easy. Their journey has been tough. They were treated terribly in some places and wonderfully in others but to

² Brueggemann et al *Texts for preaching*

continue the journey, they must care for others as a mother cares for her children...in doing so, they are commanded to care for others as God does.

We are coming to the end of this journey. 2020 is almost over and there will be a time when COVID is a desert memory. There will be a time when there are no adults around with the memory of what this was like. I can't help but wonder what rituals we will bring out into the new land. What habits will embed themselves in the cultural routines of generations to come? What laws will remain in place?

I am hoping that the next generation won't even think of dashing here and there but rather spend their travel fuel slowly and wisely.

We have learned that to care for ourselves is to take care of others. No more soldiering on! Infecting our fellows. We have learned that Communities are their strongest when faced with defeat. And we have learned how important touch and voice are to our souls - especially in worship.

And we remember that the road so far has been tough. Will we invent a ritual that celebrates the milestones of our journey? A thanksgiving or Passover. The road ahead will have its ups and downs but we are changed forever with appreciation of the small, close things we can't always see. We know now the human desire for 'face to face' and what it is to live without it. We know the Promised Land will come with new challenges. As we turn our faces to God in each other, we know now from the resurrection, the end is not the end but the beginning.

Dear Lord, I don't ask for milk and honey – only justice for the earth and mercy for those in need. Amen