

Sermon – St Brandon’s, 29th October 2023

Nehemiah 8; Matthew 24:30-35

Teach us, O Lord, the way of your statutes. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen. Please do be seated.

When was the last time you heard a piece of music that moved you, or watched a film that made you cry? What was the note that took the tears from welling up to spilling over, or the moment in the scene on the screen that tipped you over the edge?

In Nehemiah 8, all the exiles who have returned to Jerusalem gather in the square before the Water Gate, a place of weighty prophetic significance for God’s people. The prophet Ezekiel foretold of a river flowing from the sanctuary of the temple, a river that turns saltwater into fresh water, a river of life. The trees on its banks produce eternal food and their leaves heal. The Water Gate evokes this deeply hoped for promise of new creation.

But as Ezra reads the law, all the people can do for now is mourn, acutely aware of how much it has taken to return to Jerusalem – and of all that was lost along the way. What does it mean to return, when there has been so much pain, so much regret, so much loss? There is no “going back” to the “good old days”. Here at the Water Gate, the people stand between the traumatic past and the promised future, in the ache of the anxious present. Fearful, sad and sorry, the people weep, perhaps in a similar way to how Matthew’s gospel tells us the whole world will mourn when Jesus returns. There is mourning because there is a moment of realisation of how far we get it wrong.

Ezra stands before the people and reads the book of the law of Moses, the Torah. Perhaps he started with the *shema*, the cornerstone of the Mosaic law: “Hear, oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Perhaps he followed it with the 10 Commandments, which give a little bit more detail about what it means to love God – no other gods, no idols, no taking His name lightly. Sabbath rest. Loving our neighbours properly – honouring parents, no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, no envy.

It sounds simple enough – a list of commandments. We can tick those off, surely. But the exiles of Israel – freshly arrived back in Jerusalem – mourn because they know that it is not that easy. Even if you smash all your idols, you

find new ones lurking that you hadn't noticed before – the desire for power, for wealth, for status, for admiration, for likes on the ancient equivalent of Facebook. Even if you don't murder anyone, there are still a thousand ways to stab someone in the back.

Men, women and older children attend to the words of the law, listening. I wonder what it was that started the first person weeping?

Teach us, oh Lord, the way of Your statutes.

In Western cultures like Britain, we culturally tend to think of law as something to do or not do; yes/no; a legalistic code. But the Torah – the law given to Moses – is something much more than that. It is what we might call “sacramental”, a gift of God, intended to draw the people of Israel into His new way of life for them. The Torah was not supposed to be a code to crack like a morning crossword, but a lens to begin to see and interacting with the world differently. New meaning would develop over time, as the people began to live in the way of the Torah – it would become clear just how tricky it was to forsake idols and learn to love neighbours.

From this perspective, it's significant that Ezra doesn't just read the law, as if it's obvious from the text what it means. There are layers to the law and he makes provision for their unpeeling through interpretation, so that every man, woman and child standing there can understand. We see Jesus doing this too, in the Sermon on the Mount, when he explains that the sin of murder is not just the act of killing – there is a murderous pathway that leads to killing, and it starts with how we deal with our anger. Jesus is joining in on a long history of interpretation of Torah. Jesus' interpretation of the law identifies the root of sin, which is always in the human heart before it shows up in how we use our words, how we look at each other, how we act. Similarly, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus interprets his crucifixion and resurrection for the two unnamed disciples, starting with Torah and all the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible. And their hearts burn within them when he opens the Scriptures up, just as the hearts of the returned exiles are moved to tears when Ezra reads the law and it is interpreted for them.

What I'm trying to get at is that the meaning of Torah was clearly not obvious to the returned exiles at the Water Gate, just as the meaning of the Bible – which includes the Torah – is not always obvious to us today. In fact, the Bible can be deeply confusing for the uninitiated, and even downright dangerous

when interpreted poorly. I often ask myself why it all has to be so difficult to understand. Why wasn't the law made simpler for the people of Israel? Why didn't Jesus just make himself clearer, or at least the gospel writers have the common sense to explain things that he said in more detail? Why does the church have a difficult collection of texts like the Bible rather than a nice policy brief or to-do list?

On my better days, I try to put myself in God's shoes – impossible to actually do because He is God and I am not – but as a thought experiment. How could God communicate in the best way possible with human beings who were so mired in sin that even 10 bullet points on two stone blocks was a lot to ask? He intervenes in a way that does not undermine human freedom, to make us robots – he gives principles, patterns for life, liturgies, ways of worshipping and treating others. I am not pretending to be an expert on Leviticus here but from a big picture perspective that seems to be what is happening. God's law interacting with and seeking to transform a culture. It will be messy, but God is clearly not interested in shortcuts. There is human-divine interaction in the process of interpretation; human response to God's laws, methods of communal reading that develop over time. I am very thankful, for instance, for the commentaries I read on Nehemiah and Matthew in preparation for this sermon – it is a wonderful thing to be able to glean from trusted, long-standing traditions of biblical interpretation, both Christian and Jewish. I really recommend reading the Bible with someone else, or borrowing a commentary, if you are finding it confusing on your own.

To summarise, interacting with Scripture is not about cracking a code; it's about putting on a new pair of glasses. To start seeing, thinking and acting differently. A whole new *way* of life. This is why Jesus saying HE is the way, the truth and the life is so significant. He is the enfleshment of Torah – the wisdom of God walking around the earth. He not only shows us by his example what God intends for human life, but he actually unites us to God in the incarnation – so that our own flesh, our bodies, can be interpreted by His love and become interpretations of that love for others. So while the Bible and biblical interpretation is absolutely vital to the life of the church, just as Torah was and is vital to the faithful of Israel, God's ultimate purpose for His people has always been a fleshy one: *we* are to become a living interpretation of God's love, truth and justice.

*Teach us, oh Lord, the **way** of Your statutes.*

At the Water Gate, mourning turns to joy. The repentant exiles are nourished with the words of the life-giving law and provided with a feast, including “those for whom nothing is prepared”.

Likewise, may we who have been fed with God’s living Word – revealed in Scripture and made incarnate in Christ – prepare to feast at the Lord’s table.

Amen.