

For many weeks, the homilies I have given at this Evening Prayer service have focused on the reading from the Christian scriptures which for sometime have all been from the Gospels. This evening I am going to break the habit and focus more on our reading from Deuteronomy largely because I think it more apt as we begin the second week of Lent.

Deuteronomy literally means second law, but rather than an additional law, it is a copy of the law given as part of a piece that is written as though it were a farewell discourse by Moses to the Children of Israel as they are shortly to cross into the promised land. The first 30 chapters of Deuteronomy consist of three sermons by Moses. Followed by the Song of Moses, the blessing of Moses, and then the death of Moses in the land of Moab before the crossing into Canaan which is recounted in the Book of Joshua.

Our reading is from the second sermon. Note that it is entirely in the past tense: *I turned and went down from the mountain*. The unknown author is having Moses review what happened well past the actual events. Moses had been up Mt. Sinai for 40 days in God's presence. He has received the tablets of the covenant that is the 10 commandments. Moses comes down when God warns him that the people are behaving corruptly. God suggests that he might destroy them and make for Moses a better and more numerous people. Moses sees the people dancing around the idol they have created, the Golden Calf. He dashes the tablets to the ground breaking them to pieces – the destruction a sign that the people have broken the covenant. Then Moses prostrates himself on the ground for 40 days and 40 nights to atone for the people's behaviour asking God to spare them in their disobedience.

As I have said to you many times about the Gospels they are not histories they are theological statements. So it is with Deuteronomy. If you want the blow by blow story of the Golden Calf, you have to read Exodus 32 but even that is more theology than history. Our lesson this evening is about the consequences of rebelling against God. Indeed the entire message of Deuteronomy is that obedience to God brings blessing and disobedience brings misery. So the law is rehearsed throughout Chapters 11 through 29 so that it is clear what it is to follow God's law.

Let me say something of the provenance of Deuteronomy. No one knows exactly when it was first written down doubtless it was preceded by a long oral tradition. In the year 622 BCE, during repairs to the Temple of Solomon a book was discovered known as the Book of the Law – the discovery is recounted in the 22nd chapter of the 2nd Book of Kings. Scholars believe that that book is the core of Deuteronomy – a copy or even a summary of the laws found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. It is important to know that like the Christian scripture, the Hebrew scripture evolved and was codified over time. Deuteronomy in its current form was likely edited by priestly writers well after the return from the Babylonian exile – as much as 8 centuries after the events on which it reports. The law became canonical in the 4th century BCE, but the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible was not fully set until the 2nd century CE.

So why is this lesson from Deuteronomy apt for hearing and contemplating in Lent. Lent is a season for reflection, self-evaluation, and repentance, a turning away from self-destructive behaviour. Our passage from Deuteronomy makes it clear that God is faithful no matter how faithless is humanity. But I think in the 26 centuries since the discovery of the Book of the Law in the 1st Temple we have learned that while God is ever faithful, he does not punish us for our faithlessness. We punish ourselves by our behaviour. God's law is a prescription for a fulfilling, meaningful life. God does not promise life will be easy, nor that life will be endless joy. God promises that we can be healthful through the vicissitudes of life if we follow his law.

What does this mean for 21st century people? Well not very much different than it meant for those in the wilderness for 40 years more than 3000 years ago or those who found the Book of the Law 600 years later or those about whom we read in the Gospels. The biggest sins, the biggest acts of self destruction have not changed since the Children of Israel danced around the Golden Calf. Worshiping false Gods and raising up idols remain humanity's two most self-destructive behaviours. They are very closely connected.

The two most appallingly false Gods in our time are power and money. The idols we raise up are signs of that worship: vacations the cost of which would support an ordinary family for a decade or more, houses that render opulent an inadequate adjective, clothes, jewels, fine wine, control, adulation, cruising through life in a rarefied atmosphere that shuts out the needs of 99% of humanity – idols that cause us to largely miss out on what it is to be human.

Let us be clear those of us well below the stratosphere of wealth and power are not immune. We worship power and money just as much, but the coda to our prayers to our false Gods is more frequently: if only we had! We too have our rather more modest idols. We too can miss out what it is to be human – focused so much on what we don't have, that we lose sight of all the blessings we have. The punishment for kneeling before the false Gods and worshiping their idols will be severe, but remember we do it to ourselves and those around us. The one true God is ever there to receive us if we can ever turn our back to the tempter's power. Lent is the season for us to work hard at so doing knowing that God is there for us; we just have to turn away and turn towards God.

A final word on idols. The objects I have named are not idols in and of themselves. It is our obsession with them that imparts the poison to them.

Our reading this evening from Mark, I think was chosen by the authors of the lectionary as a counter weight to Deuteronomy. With the mother-in-law whom he cured, the countless sick whom he healed, and the leper whom he cleansed Jesus showed that the Grace of God is freely given. It is not a commodity that is earned by human merit. *If you choose, you can make me clean*, says the leper. Jesus responds *I do choose. Be made clean*. So will the living God choose over and over again whenever we place the false gods and the idols behind us.

Amen