

Down to Basics

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Text: Deuteronomy 34. 1-12

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. The LORD said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, “I will give it to your descendants”; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.’ Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Matthew 22.34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your

neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ He said to them, ‘How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’ ”? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

And as someone in the Lectionary group said, no wonder. No wonder no one was able to give him an answer. No wonder they stopped their questions. This chapter, Matthew 22, has shown Jesus as a spectacularly versatile teacher and theologian – in the narrative, these stories of encounter that we have read over the past month or so, all happen on one day, in the Temple at Jerusalem in the last week of Jesus’ life. He is before a mixed crowd of followers and critics. Matthew presents him as a kind of virtuoso, and it is impressive to see the various techniques he uses in each short scene. First Jesus tells the impossible story of the king’s banquet, a mystifying parable that seems to imply that even the poorest and least able among us have what it takes to dress up for the grandest party ever. So he mystifies. Then he sidesteps a trick question about politics and religion with an evasive quip – render unto Caesar, he laughs. The next passage we did not read, but it is the famous story of the question about the woman married successively to seven brothers – to whom is she married in heaven? On this one Jesus engages his opponents, and gives a serious theological answer. That isn’t what heaven is like, he explains. Now today we have two more. First, on the question of the greatest commandment, Jesus, gives an absolutely straightforward response, down to basics, no repartee, no messing around. He refers his listeners to their own tradition in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Love God, love neighbour as self. And finally, in what Matthew evidently thinks is the ultimate *tour de*

force, this very odd dialogue on the question of whether the Messiah is the son or the Lord of King David. And the people said, “What?”

The scholars say that this little reflection on who calls who Lord refers to Psalm 110, a favourite of the early Christians. Jesus seems to be saying that the Messiah is both the product of the tradition, that is, a son of the royal line of David, and also the re-definer of it. Also the one who brings the tradition to its radically new shape in the Kingdom of God which Jesus taught about.

Perhaps this is not such an obscure point after all, for we can see the parallel in the life of every person. Our heritage defines us and also we reshape the heritage by our own lives.

On a baptism Sunday we look at these little ones and wonder about their lives. Wonder about how they are shaped by the past and will shape the future. How high our hopes are for them – that they will be healthy and clever and compassionate, good at sports and music and art. And more than just good at things, we hope so much that they will be happy, even though we know that that may be the hardest of all.

Interesting to imagine Lukas and Finn when they are as old as Moses in the story that Nancy read. Say in the year 2125 or 30. One hundred and twenty years, sight not impaired, vigour not abated. No one knows the future but by then it might well be quite normal. And what will their lives have been, how will they understand their place in the cosmos? They will have grown up in a world with a thousand TV channels – and anyway who needs TV channels when you have the internet? Perhaps they will have figured out the environment – they will look back at us and not believe we gathered pounds and pounds of newspapers on our doorsteps day after day, or drove vehicles powered by fuel that could just be used up. The climate of Canada will be different by then. And perhaps they will have made progress figuring out a political system that puts limits on the disparity between the wealthy and the poor. Perhaps by then, all the political and economic troubles that have produced the Occupy Movement here in Toronto and elsewhere will have been met with creative new forms of social organization. Maybe the nation state will be obsolete, maybe some new regimes of accountability will govern the world’s financial life. And those new forms, no doubt, will generate challenges of their own. Given the current rate of change in technology, medicine, science – it is hard even to begin to picture the lives of these little folks as they unfold.

We can probably predict a few things though. Like Moses, like most of us, they will likely have spent part of their lives in the wilderness. Not sure how to proceed, anxious about the future. There will surely be times when it seems that the only way forward is to follow what seems no more substantial than a pillar of cloud or a fiery vision. And also like him, even if they are blessed to be part of some grand and important movement for the common good, for liberation, they may not have the chance to see the end of what they have begun. They too may only glimpse a Promised Land.

Interesting too, to think of how their faith lives may develop, what the nature of their Christianity will be. As people who have just promised to help them with that, we should think on it. The situation described in the New Testament gives us hints. The Pharisees that Jesus had to spar with were facing the same dilemma as the United Church. How do you practice a faith that has been decentred by a cosmopolitan, secular, and genuinely diverse society? A faith whose social prominence and political influence has waned. A faith that has been knocked off its perch as moral reference point for all but a small minority. They are saying to him, given our situation, what is most important?

The answer that Jesus gives them is this: stick to the core of your faith. He sends them to the primary prayer of Judaism, the Shema – love God with heart, soul and mind; and to Leviticus, love neighbour. This is not a generic Golden Rule, but the heart of the Jewish tradition, and it becomes the heart of the Christian tradition. As Jesus says, all the law and the prophets hang on it. He is saying, you can practice your faith even when your power is waning, your institutions seem to be crumbling, and you have become a minority. The validity of this practice is not based on social importance or political influence, he says. Like the law of gravity, this law will hold.

Moreover, Jesus says that these laws about loving God and loving neighbour are somehow similar. *The second is like it*, he says. The sense of wonder and curiosity and reverence that we bring to God have a place in our human relationships. The way you feel looking at a starry night, or a storm on the ocean – feel that way about your neighbour.

And the other way too. The qualities of devotion and tenderness, delight and self-sacrifice that we experience in our human lives apply to God. The gentle way you approach your baby, your grandchild, your friend, your aging parents – approach God that way, says Jesus. It is that law of love and only love which lies at the core – all the

law and prophets hang on it. All the social justice, all the environment, all the political integrity, all the anti-poverty, all the anti-racism, all these come down to basics. Love God. Love neighbour. Amen.