

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT: FEBRUARY 21st 2010
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

Deuteronomy 26:1-11..Notes

- The first five books of the Bible are usually linked together into a collection called the Pentateuch (five books); Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy as the last book is essentially a long speech by Moses in which he sets out the conditions for living in the land of Canaan and warnings about what would happen if they failed to obey God's laws.
- The book is a collection of material put together over a long period of time and probably took on its central role as a part of the religious renewal under King Josiah (640-609).
- It should be seen as a book offering hope to a people facing destruction, a final chance as to how they might fulfil the covenant demands.
- Its message can be summed up by: "A person does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of Yahweh" (Dt 8:2-3)
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A reading of the text will help us appreciate that what we have here is a much earlier liturgical action that concerned the offering of the fruits of the land that has been worked over by the Deuteronomist, the group of editors responsible for the final form of the book of Deuteronomy. The liturgical setting helps us understand that the message we find here goes to the very heart of the responsibilities the people will take on if they choose to enter the land of Canaan, the land of the covenant.

When we remember that this account is one that has been written long after the people had entered the land, it is a story that looks at the present and interprets it and seeks to understand it in the light of faith. The people are under attack. The northern kingdom of Israel has disappeared and the southern kingdom seems to be on the verge of disappearing as well. When we remember that Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 and the people taken away into exile in Babylon, this book with its message came at a significant time in their history. The cry must have been: *if we are God's people, why are these terrible things happening to us?*

The message throughout the book is clear. God is their king and ruler and their calling is to live in obedience under God. As we see from all of the laws that are contained in the Pentateuch, this obedience, this living under God applies to every human activity, it matters not how insignificant that act might seem. God must rule in their lives. They must live in obedience under him.

This is why the opening line states that the land they are about to enter is the land that has been given to them by God. They did not earn it. They did not win it by conquest. It was given to them by God and as it was given to them by God, they have to live in the land according to the laws set out by Yahweh. From the perspective of the writers, as they look around at the painful situation with which the people are now faced, the people have sinned. They are struggling and suffering at the hands of the Babylonians because of their sins. Instead of God ruling over them they have ruled over their own lives and their self rule has led them to destruction.

This is a key Deuteronomic teaching. If their statement of their creed is true then its consequences must be seen in their lives. The bringing of the first fruits of their gardens and herds is a sign of their willingness to have God as their Lord and King.

Interestingly too is the idea that we are not victims of circumstances but we live in the consequences of all that we do. The people had ignored God's laws and when nothing happened to them they arrogantly presumed that they could get away with it. They sinned and kept on sinning until it reached the point that they could no longer see that what they were doing was even a sin! What the Deuteronomist is reminding them is that if they want to live as God's children then they have to accept that their way of life is the one set out for them by God. They cannot live in the way they want. They cannot pick and choose the laws they might obey. They cannot water down, modify, compromise and be half hearted in their faith lives. To do so will mean destruction. "Look around you" says the writer, "your world is falling apart because you insist on playing God".

The subsequent call is, of course, to repent. The reforms of King Josiah were all about repentance. About acknowledgement of sin, of accepting that they were not living the covenant as they should and about changing their way of living. They, like we Christians today, are called upon to live in such a way that it is clear that God is the one who rules over all we do. Not just the convenient things, but everything in our lives. We are called upon to live differently.

Notes on Luke 4:1-13

- Note the role of the Holy Spirit. It is Luke's way of highlighting the prophetic nature of the ministry of Jesus.
- The word used for "tempting" is the same word that is used in the Bible to describe what was happening to the people of Israel in the wilderness during the Exodus.
- Satan is described as the *tester* in Job 2:3. For Luke he would have been seen as the one who was ruling over the counter kingdom that was made up of demons and the unclean spirits with whom Jesus will do battle.
- This victory of Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel is a reassurance for the readers in the face of what is going to happen. They need to keep its message in mind (and the victory of Jesus) when they get to the Golgotha story.

In Luke's story we have been told in the genealogies that Jesus is, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God's Son. It is as the Son of God that Jesus will do battle with Satan who, for Luke is the one who has authority and power in the shadow kingdom. This Satan is a parody of God and his kingdom a parody of the Kingdom proclaimed and inaugurated by Jesus. This is what these temptations are – they are parodies of what is on offer by God and the responses Jesus makes to them are to be seen in that light. Satan offers this, which in some ways does not seem to be all that evil but it stands in contrast to what God wants.

This is part of the seductive power of Satan. None of the temptations are so outrageously evil, just self serving slants on how Jesus might live in the land. There are no temptations to the big sins of murder, adultery, theft, violence and the like, just subtle temptations to serve God in ways that might make Jesus' life a little more

comfortable. That is why Luke can talk of two kingdoms – there is one that revolves around self serving and there is the other where God is the primary focus of all that we do. Satan’s subtlety is seen in that he keeps the focus on the person of Jesus and not on God. Jesus is invited to sin but not to disobey God. His sin would be that he looks after himself first and then obeys God. Luke presents this as a real struggle for those who want to be disciples. More often than not people do not reject God totally. They are more likely to compromise in moments when self interests become more important than the bigger demands of the Kingdom of God. The problem is that these sins are much harder to acknowledge as sin. They seem so reasonable and are so easy to justify and sustain.

These three temptations bring to mind the threefold denials of Peter and the threefold taunting of Jesus on the Cross. For the Greek audience it would resonate because of the popular understanding that there were three chief vices: love of pleasure, love of possessions and love of glory. These are to be found at the heart of the three temptations. In his rejection of these temptations, Jesus is presented, here at the opening of the Gospel as being a man of great righteousness, of virtue and so a man who could be trusted and followed.

Of course there are other biblical images to be found in this story, particularly the links to the forty years of wandering in the wilderness by the people of God during the Exodus. These were years of testing, so that before they entered the land of Canaan they were able to decide that they would obey God and that they were willing to abide by the covenant. This was important for it represented an understanding that they were not just any old people. They were the people of God. It was through the testing and the commitment that they were able to be called “God’s son” (Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1). They were tested but they also tested the Lord and at the heart of their complaints we can see the age old sins of pleasure and security. They lusted after the comfortable lives they thought they used to have in Egypt and they wanted God to take away all hardship and struggles and give them an easy passage into the land of milk and honey. They thought that the Exodus was about them when in fact it was really all about God. In this temptation story we have the same testing. Satan tries to convince Jesus that his ministry is all about himself, that Jesus is the key to what is happening. Jesus sees through this and tells Satan that his ministry is about his Father and that its defining characteristic is humble obedience.

The Jesus that emerges from the testing is the obedient Son. Jesus chooses not self service but the service of God. Importantly for Luke, this is done out in the wilderness where no one could witness what was going on. Jesus could have compromised a little and no one would have known. He could have looked after himself first, could have introduced a little comfort into his life and still been more or less faithful to his Father’s business. But he chose instead the sacrificial path, the costly path of obedience, even in something as simple as the food he would eat.

In some ways Jesus presents the fundamental teaching of discipleship when he reasserts the Biblical truth: *human beings do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God.* In the Gospel we see Jesus living in this way and this is the way of discipleship he sets out for his followers. In all that they do, it is the word of God that must be the defining force, the defining reality and not self interest and self serving.

Conclusion:

As we move into this first week of Lent we are given a pretty tough challenge. Both readings hammer home at a single point: God has a way of life he sets out for us and if we choose to be disciples then we must live according to that way of life and not according to a way of life we might like to draw up. That is not easy.

They also have a powerful warning to us. The temptations to sin are not about dramatic sins. They go more to the heart of sin: self serving. They challenge the idea of a comfortable religion without demands, a God who can be shaped and controlled by what we want and about how we might like to be living. They destroy any possibility of God submitting himself and his kingdom to our timetables, to our sense of priorities, to our political expectations and ambitions and demand that we learn to be humble before God, to be obedient to his word and to be willing to offer up in sacrifice the pain and hardships that might come with such a vocation.

Here, in our first week of Lent we have our journey mapped out for us. We need to pause and ask ourselves just where God fits into our daily living. Do we offer to God all that we do? Are the things we do, the things we say, the plans we make acceptable sacrifices to God to God? Is our present way of living a sacrificial gift that would please our King and Creator? Probably not.

We thus begin our Lenten journey as a journey of exploration under the Holy Spirit to discover who we really are as disciples, to go into our hearts and our souls, to examine our lives and what we do so that we can root out all self serving and live in obedience to the One who created us, who called us and who sent his Only Son to die on the cross that we may celebrate eternal life with Him. It is a season that requires much prayer and sacrifice if we are to come to Easter refreshed, renewed and forgiven. May the Spirit with which we begin Lent lead us forward with courage.