

Sermon: 30 September 2018

God the Father

Deuteronomy 32: 1-18 and Luke 12: 22-34

Today we are beginning a short four week sermon series exploring the Trinity. We are beginning today, then we will skip a week for our Harvest Festival next Sunday. For the rest of October we will explore God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and then end by exploring One God. So this morning, I am going to try to say one or two things about God the Father... but I want to begin with Moses.

Moses is at the end of his life. The reluctant leader of a multitude of former slaves, who had spent the previous four decades coaxing them, cajoling them through immaturity in the Sini desert. Now just as his life was ending, the Hebrew people stood on the threshold of the Promised Land, eager to take he reigns of nationhood.

Before Moses stands a young peoples, the oldest in their late thirties. None of them has a memory of Egypt, for all were born in the wilderness. None of their parents have survived. Moses faces them now, knowing he will not be joining these children as they cross the Jordon. He will die here, in sight of the land God has promised to their ancestor Abraham. The crowds before Moses buzz with energy, they are excited. They have only known the rigors of Sini; blazing heat, cold nights, scorpions, vipers, sandstorms and the relentless search for water. This youthful nation have heard the stories of Egypt from their parents, the horrors of slavery dim when contrasted with the bright memory of Egypt's gold. Thus Moses has one last chance, to set the record straight, to get history down not just for these children, but for all who are to follow.

Moses, frail and elderly, stood on a threshold, the liminal space between what has gone before, and what is yet to come, has asked to speak to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's descendants. To give them the hope and grit they will desperately need in his absence.

The book of Deuteronomy, is the record of Moses' last words to the children of Israel. It is a book that begins by recounting their recent history. An account of God's faithfulness. But paradoxically Deuteronomy does not address the issues of the day. But issues that will arise in future centuries. The appointment of kings and how to recognise false prophets. I wonder what those young people thought of these seemingly odd instructions, commandants for the future, when stood impatiently near the bank of the Jorden, eager to explore their new home and the bounty it would provide. But Moses knew that these were wayward children, like their parents, and I am sure knew that waywardness would also be their future. Yet with Israel, God did not abandon his project, but remained committed to the people he had chosen, bringing it to a successful completion, one that was many generations ahead.

Moses ends his oratory with a song. A song for the children to sing, to chant, to shout at they cross the Jordon. It is quite a long song and we only heard a portion of it this morning. It is a song that includes a summary of Israel's history, God's provision, Israel's faithlessness

and God's chastisement of his people. But ultimately it is a song about the nature of God. The nature of God the Father.

The Rock, his work is perfect,

All his ways are just,

A faithful God, without deceit,

Just and upright is he... (Deut 32: 4)

Perhaps the image of God as a rock, an immovable crag or cliff, does not chime easily with an image of God as a loving Father, as Jesus encourages our relationship to be. But if we compare Israel's God with the gods of their neighbours, we can see the competition is not up to much at all. The Canaanites sacrificed their children to appease their unpredictable deities. The Egyptians had lived in fear of their capricious gods, and one by one they had fallen to the plagues unleashed by Moses. The river god turned to blood, the sacred fly became a swarming pest, the sun-god Ra disappeared behind a cloud, the great bull failed to protect his livestock. In one of the earliest creation myths, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, the god Marduk creates humankind so that they can serve him as slaves.

Moses' song reminds Israel about the nature of its God, as a decisive, truthful, faithful and upright Father. Someone with the reliability of a rock you can climb on and find safety. Like a toddler, climbing into their Dad's arms, to be comforted, held secure against their Father's chest. Sadly for Israel and for us, we often reject and forget the security of the Father who carries us. We wriggle out of his arms and go our own way, to use Moses' words; **'You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.'** (Deut 32: 18)²

But I think that Moses in his last words to the nation of Israel, to the children arrayed in front him, and in his final song, was pressing a greater point. That this is a God in relationship with his people. A Father who conceived them. A Mother who gave birth to them. Moses raised among the animal shaped god's of Egypt, rediscovered a forgotten fact of God. Forgotten during the 400 years of slavery. That God is a person. Moses' song tells of the God in person looking after Israel and that their own 'personhood' is a faint reflection of what God is like.

That is why we get all of these strange laws and commandment in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. These laws simply set the boundaries of a vastly unequal relationship. Between an awesome and holy God and an ordinary people, prone to failure. When God makes a list of commandments, the Ten Commandments are repeated in Deuteronomy, he begins with love. Love takes first place. The basis of his whole relationship with humanity.

This relationship of love, is one that reflects the personhoods of God. Loving others is not a strange thing for God. It is the root of who they are; God the Father, loving the Son in the Spirit. God the Father by his very nature is life giving. Love between the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit gave birth to creation, so that other people, might also love them.

Unfortunately, we, like Israel, are not very good a love. Fortunately God perseveres. Love takes first place in God's whole relationship with humanity. God meets us face to face, speaks to us as a friend, listens to us and argues back, negotiates and signs contracts. When jilted, God suffers like any wounded lover. God's love means he feels pain. Yet God's love is faithful and constant. Unlike a rock, it will not be worn away by the wind and rain slowly eroding it.

Moses' song tells the children of Israel, who are about to become a nation, who God is. By reminding them who they are. They are God's chosen people, chosen to have a special and loving relationship with him. Having a special relationship with Israel, does not mean that God declines to be involved with other peoples. As Moses says; **'the Most High apportioned the nations... he fixed the boundaries of the peoples.'** (Deut 32: 8) Choosing Israel does not mean rejecting other peoples. Rather Israel is God's means of bringing blessing on the whole world. Deuteronomy, Moses' last words, focuses on God's commitment to Israel, in order to encourage Israel itself, as they cross the Jordan and embark on the next stage of God's plan. As Moses' song will go on to foretell, there will be some horrible consequences when Israel starts serving other so called gods. Yet how reassuring the God's love does not end. God does not go back on his determination to be Israel's God. It is really hard to get God to give up on his relationship with us. Oh how stubborn God is!

Amen

Questions

Below are some questions you may like to reflect on, either individually or with your house group.

1. God the Father is given numerous names in the Bible – Rock, Father, Creator. How many different names for God can you list?
2. Which name for God particularly resonates for you? Why? What is important about that name for your relationship with God?
3. 'Father' as a name for God can be troubling for some, especially if they had a difficult relationship with their human father. What alternatives could we use?
4. 'God is love' is this a helpful way to think about God? Explain or think through your answer.
5. What do you think of my sermon? What stayed with you when you heard it for the first time on Sunday? On re-reading it, what strikes you now?
6. Read Deuteronomy 32: 1-18. What does it tell you about the nature of God the Father?
7. Read the rest of Moses' song (Deuteronomy 32: 19-43). Do these verses tell you something different about the nature of God? How do you respond to the idea of God being jealous?

Prayer

Some ideas for prayer this week

1. Give thanks for your personal relationship with God.
2. Ask God to reveal one aspect of his nature to you more this week.
3. Pray for a family member or friend who does not yet know God as Father.
4. Pray for those who struggle in their personal relationships with their human parents.
5. Pray for the people of Israel, that they might still be a blessing to all other nations.

Bibliography

Numbers and Deuteronomy for Everyone by John Goldingay.

I find it very useful to dip into commentaries when I am preparing for sermons and when I come across particularly complex, weird or confusing bits of scripture. The '*... for Everyone*' commentary series by John Goldingay for the Old Testament and Tom Wright for the New Testament are particularly accessible and I would recommend them to house groups and individual who have chosen to study a specific book from the bible.

The Good God; Enjoying Father, Son and Spirit by Michael Reeves

This is a slim line book that I have dipped into again and again when thinking about the Trinity. It looks at the distinctiveness of God as Trinity (with some useful comparisons to other major world religions). The text begins and ends with God as love.

The Bible Jesus Read by Philip Yancey

Yancy is an accessible writer, who tackles some of the most difficult subjects of faith – suffering, death and grace. This book is a bit different. He opens up the Old Testament portraying the passionate relationship between God and his people in startling intimacy. I used the third chapter on Deuteronomy as inspiration for my sermon.

Liz Wilson 30 Sept 2018 v1.0