

SERMON – 25/8/19 – 'Know Yourself'

Introduction to the Reading

This morning we are embarking on a new series of sermons on the Book of Deuteronomy and I want to begin, before we read from the first chapter, by saying a few words by way of introduction.

To start with, what a strange name this book has – Deuteronomy. The name comes from its title in the 3rd century BC Greek translation of the Old Testament and it literally means 'second law' (which it's not). In the original Hebrew the book is called: 'These are the words' after the opening phrase of the book. This refers to the fact that this book is a record of Moses' address to the people of Israel on the verge of the Promised Land, not giving them a second law but reminding them of the Law that God had first given them 40 years previously before they had disobeyed God's call to them to advance and take the Promised Land. As a result of their disobedience, they had been sentenced to wander in the wilderness until a whole generation and more had passed away but now here they are back at the gateway to Canaan and God is giving them a second chance.

In effect this book is Moses' sermon, expounding the Law. Think of it like this. Imagine you are walking round a beautiful garden and you see a sign saying 'Keep off the grass' you are almost immediately going to experience an urge to disobey that command and walk on the said grass! It is at the very core of our fallen human nature to resist being told what we should do. And many people reading the Law of Moses in Exodus or in Leviticus think just that. 'Why should I do that?'

Now imagine walking round the beautiful garden with the head gardener and as you come to the sign which says 'Keep off the grass', the gardener explains to you that this grass needs the opportunity to recover from being walked over by thousands of pairs of feet so that it can be enjoyed by people later in the season. An explanation really can make a difference and help us to understand why the rules are there. In the opening verses of chapter 1 we are told that Moses 'told the people everything the Lord had commanded' and 'began to explain God's laws and teachings' (1:3,5) Moses proclaimed and expounded – that is to say he preached. As we read today and over the coming weeks, it is important for us to grasp the fact that this book is a sermon and that what we are hearing is Moses preaching to us down through the centuries.

Reading: Deuteronomy 1:19-45

“In spite of what I said, you still would not trust the Lord.” (Deut.1:32)

Although I'm not quite as old as Moses was, I do begin to feel my age, and not just because I'm tired after a very busy summer. Perhaps my anecdotage is beginning. 40 years ago this year I sat my O-Grades and this time 40 years ago I was beginning to study for my Highers. I already knew that I was called to ministry although it would be another 5 years before I applied to be considered as a candidate and 5 more until I was ordained. A lot of water can flow under a bridge in 40 years.

Some of you cannot remember that far back yet, but it's a sign of the average age of the congregation that most of you here this morning can probably easily recall what was going on in your life 40 years ago. In 1979, perhaps you remember, there was a referendum on whether to create a devolved assembly for Scotland. The vote was 52-48% in favour but it had been required that at least 40% of the total electorate would have to vote in favour for it to be enacted, and that threshold was not reached. For better or for worse, depending on your political allegiance, the Thatcher years ensued and it would be another 20 years before the current Scottish Parliament was established. In the political realm, 1979 also saw the first elections to the European parliament, one staging post along the rocky road that has led us to the situation we currently find ourselves in for better or for worse depending on your political allegiance.

In our reading this morning we hear Moses reflecting on a period of 40 years since he had last stood at Kadesh Barnea looking over to the land that the Lord had prepared for His people and encouraging his hearers to examine themselves, to learn from previous mistakes and to step forward in faith to take possession of what it is that God has in store for them.

Jesus said, 'My Kingdom is not of this world' and the fact of the matter is that no human political settlement will ever be heaven on earth, so I have no intention of making any party political points whatsoever but rather to encourage all of you to apply the lessons of the people of Israel's 40 years in the wilderness to our own lives as individuals and to the life of the church in tumultuous times. The future stands before us and the promises of God are held out to us just as they were to those who have gone before us in the faith. Where is God leading you and me in our time and what will

our children and our grandchildren have to say in 40 years about the choices we make in our time?

As we begin to listen for God's Word to us in what Moses says to the people of his time, remember that as he speaks at the close of 40 years of aimless and fruitless wandering, he must have been speaking with considerable personal regret, since as leader of the disobedient people, he himself was also being denied entry to the Promised Land.

Moses rewinds 40 years and begins his sermon recounting the 11-day, 100-mile journey from Mount Sinai where He had received the Law from God, through inhospitable desert to Kadesh Barnea, an oasis on the borders of the Promised Land. "Look, there it is," says the Lord. "Go and occupy it. Do not hesitate or be afraid." (Deut.1:21) But instead of simply obeying God's command to them, they decide to appoint a scouting party of twelve (in other words, a committee) to spy out the land (that is, to conduct a feasibility study) and to report back. All twelve scouts were fulsome in their account of how wonderfully fruitful the land was that God was giving them, but (there's always a 'but') that the people there were stronger and taller than they were and that their cities had walls that reached to the sky. Only two of the twelve (Caleb and Joshua) were in favour of trusting the Lord. The others, we are told in the account in the Book of Numbers (Numbers 13:23-33) "spread a false report among the Israelites about the land they had explored – that land doesn't even produce enough to feed the people who live there and everyone we saw was very tall." False news, anyone? (There really is nothing new under the sun!)

Nothing that Moses could say about the promises of God, the God who had done marvellous things for them, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt through the waters of the sea and providing for their needs through manna in the wilderness and water from the rock, nothing would persuade them to turn from their disobedience. And so God spoke: "Not one of your from the evil generation will enter the fertile land that I promised to give your ancestors. Only Caleb, son of Jephunneh, will enter it... Not even you, Moses will enter the land. But strengthen the determination of your helper, Joshua, son of Nun. He will lead Israel to occupy the land." (Deut.1:35-38)

And like so many individuals and churches and nations over the years, when the real consequences of having made a particular decision hit home, the Israelites back-pedal. 'OK then, Lord, we *will* go and take the land' –

but it's too late. Their own armour will not protect them because the Lord will not go up with them. God tells them they will be defeated and so they are. What a salutary tale and one that must surely make us all take stock with regard not only to our own circumstances but also to those of the church in our day and our nation.

So what are the questions we need to ask ourselves? What is the Lord saying to us all at this time? In the face of whatever decisions that we may be facing as individuals, as a church and as a nation there are likely to be pros and cons. In the case of the Israelites, the report was two-pronged: it was undeniably a good land that the Lord was giving them, but it was also the case that there would be tough opposition to face in taking the land. Isn't that often the way with the personal decisions we each face? God promises us good things but between us and the fulfilment of those promises there is almost always a challenging road.

Some of you here today will have a very strong sense of what it is that God requires of you. Perhaps your horizons are filled with a vision of what God is calling you to in these days and you know that if you walk in that way there will be great blessing even though there may be significant challenges along the path. Don't be afraid. This is the way. Walk in it.

On the other hand, some of you will be able to see only the challenges and perhaps you even feel it is your role in life to highlight those challenges to all and sundry lest they set off thoughtlessly into an unknown and potentially dangerous future. With the prospect of the Promised Land before them, that's what the overwhelming majority of the scouting party did, even to the extent of spreading false rumours about the dangers that might lie ahead, and as a result Israel was condemned to go nowhere for 40 years. Don't shut your ears to the voice of God. With Him all things are possible.

Equally, many of you may actually already be wandering rather aimlessly without any sense of where the Lord may be leading you whether as an individual, as a church member or as a citizen of this country. The first call upon your life is to discern just what it is that God wants you to be doing. Have you ever asked Him what direction He wants you to be taking? You might just be surprised at what He has to say.

You know, whatever our future may turn out to be, whatever kind of Europe and whatever kind of United Kingdom and whatever kind of Scotland, whatever kind of church ultimately emerges in the coming years, the primary calling given to each one of us is to fix our eyes on Jesus and to go where He is leading each one of us. We may have got it spectacularly wrong in days gone by but it is into the future that we must all go. Think of the apostle Peter – how badly he had let Jesus down. Remember what it is that the Lord says to him after the resurrection. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (John 21:15-17)

Above us all today hangs a banner with Moses' words to the people of Israel: “In spite of what I said, you still would not trust the Lord.” These words signal to us the warning that we all need to heed. Before everything else, we simply need to trust the Lord. Do you love Him? Do you trust Him? Then ask Him: What does He require of you? What is He calling you to do? Then go.