

SERMON – 8/9/19 – 'Remember'

Deuteronomy 6:1-8

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord, is one.” (Deuteronomy 6:4)

Often, it is very clear indeed to me how I should begin a sermon. Often it's obvious – there is something that everyone is thinking about, perhaps an item that is in the news or something that has happened locally. This morning I might have started with Hurricane Dorian which has wreaked such devastation in the Bahamas, or the political hurricane that is blowing through our country in these days. Sometimes it is important to connect the message of the sermon to something else that is happening during the service and in that regard I might have started with the Guild dedication or the Guild theme for this year – 'Companions on the Way' – or to the fact that today we are saying farewell for a time to Anne Redpath and Andrea Fraser as they begin placements in other churches as part of their training for ministry, or to the Concert of Prayer we held here yesterday and in which many of you were involved, lifting all of the work of the congregation before God for the coming session and praying for the work of the Gospel locally and further afield. Sometimes, there is something on my own heart that compels me to speak – as many of you know, this weekend is a special one for me: yesterday, Christine and I celebrated our 28th wedding anniversary and 30 years ago this evening I was ordained to the ministry – plenty for me to think about personally but not really a springboard for a sermon.

Sometimes I just don't know where to begin and today is one of those days. Perhaps it's because I got myself into a bit of a loop last night trying to work out where to start. I had noticed when I was preparing that there were three connected words or phrases in the Bible reading – remember, never forget, and reminder – and I figured that they might be the key to the message of the passage. And yet the thrust of the passage is forward-looking as the people of Israel stand ready to enter and take the Promised Land, and surely remembering and not forgetting and reminders are about the past and the present rather than the future. What is going on here? What is Moses called God's people to remember?

Our text this morning, from verse 4 of Deuteronomy 6, lies right at the heart of the Jewish faith – it is used morning and night in daily prayers,

children are taught to make it the last thing they say before they settle down for the night and where possible a Jew will take these words on their lips before they die: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֶלֶּהינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד: - “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Or in the Good News Translation which was read for us earlier: “Israel, remember this! The Lord – and the Lord alone – is our God.” It leads straight on to what would become known as the greatest commandment - “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” And if we are to be able to keep that (or any other) commandment of God we need to start from a point of knowing who it is who is directing us and where it is that obedience is ultimately leading us as well as how, practically speaking, to live it out.

First of all, it is crucial to know God as the Lord, the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but who is utterly One, the God whose name is Love and not just some legal authority. I remember an old hymn from my childhood – 'Saviour, teach us day by day, love's sweet lesson to obey; Sweeter lesson cannot be, loving Him who first loved me.' Just a children's hymn, perhaps, but the words get to the nub of the matter as songs written for children often do – they speak about obedience but in profoundly simple terms they point us to where the impetus comes from to obey – loving Him who first loved me. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” - spiritually, emotionally, physically, in every conceivable way, pour out your love for the One who loves you with an everlasting love, the Creator of the universe, the infinite God of eternity who loves you in this moment and in every moment with an everlasting love. That fact – that wonderful, life-transforming fact, comes first – the laws and commands and stipulations and decrees come afterwards – and if you want to honour God by the keeping of His commandments, then come first and take hold of His love in Jesus Christ. That is the motivation which makes all kinds of things possible in His service.

Time and again, later in the chapter and throughout the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses warns the people of Israel when they enter the Promised Land and inherit all kinds of good things, to remember the Law and to do what is right and good, but first of all he says, “Make certain that you do not forget the *Lord* who rescued you from Egypt where you were slaves.” (Deut.6:12)

“Israel, remember this! The Lord – and the Lord alone – is our God.” So first of all, the remembering Moses calls us to points us not so much backwards but Godwards.

Secondly Moses calls us to remember by looking forwards, to reflect upon the future that God holds out to those who keep the Lord's commandments. Listen again to what Moses has to say to the people of Israel about the results which God intended the keeping of the Law to have in the lives of His people, as individuals, as families and as a nation.

“These are all the laws that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you. Obey them in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. As long as you live, you and your descendants are to honour the Lord your God and obey all His laws that I am giving you, *so that you may live in that land a long time*. Listen to them, people of Israel, and obey them! *Then, all will go well with you, and you will become a mighty nation and live in that rich and fertile land*, just as the Lord, the God of our ancestors promised.” (Deut.6:1-3)

The prospect is of a long life in which things go well and families and flocks increase. Of course, the alternative is also held out to the people – Do not worship other gods... or the Lord's anger will come against you like fire and will destroy you completely.” (Deut.6:14-15) What a waste it is when we fail to recognise the potential that God holds out to us – how foolish we are when we chase after the excitement of the moment or when we hang on uncritically to things that may have served us well in the past but which have had their day, and in the process we throw away lasting satisfaction and future blessing. The apostle Paul kept the future God had promised him to the forefront of his mind as he sought to live out God's call in sometimes challenging circumstances. To the Philippians he writes: “Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.” It's the same kind of thing that Moses is encouraging us to do here: “Listen, people of Israel, and obey! Then, all will go well with you, just as the Lord, the God of our ancestors promised.” (v.3) What is *your* future? The Lord holds out great things for those who are companions on His way and we need to remember these promises as we make our choices here and now, for they will determine our future.

“Israel, never forget these commands.” So as we remember, we are called to look Godwards and we are called to step forwards. But what does that mean for us today?

Moses calls the people of Israel to weave the commandments of God into the very fibre of everyday life. These are some of my favourite verses in the whole Old Testament as Moses lays out a pattern of daily living in which God is consciously and constantly in the midst.

“Never forget these commands that I am giving you today. Teach them to your children. Repeat them when you are at home and when you are away, when you are resting and when you are working. Tie them on your arms and wear them on your foreheads as a reminder. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.” (Deut.6:6-8) These words are not intended to be a prescribed ritual, as they have sometimes been in the lives of religious Jews who quite literally tie to their arms and around their heads boxes (called phylacteries) which contain little rolled up scrolls with the laws of God written on them, but also in the lives of Christians who have Scripture texts hung around the place. It has to be more than that. Moses is encouraging us to allow the presence of God to hallow *every* moment of *every* day so that our talking about the things of God as families and among friends and neighbours is as natural and normal as our conversations about the weather and the price of petrol. Not only is it a means of reminding one another of what God requires of us, but it can be a means of bearing witness to those who as yet have not grasped the Father's love. As Paul writes to the Colossians: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (Col.4:6) What do *you* do day by day to nourish and maintain your faith? How do you train and prepare yourself to keep the Lord's commandments in the heat of the moment? Let me encourage you to reflect in these days on the way you allow the things of God to influence and to interact with the everyday things of life. I'm not suggesting that we make a big spectacle of our faith but just that others will know by our actions and by the manner of our conversation that we are held in the love of Christ and that because our eternal future is secure with Him we can revel in the companionship He offers us even in the darkest night.

Don't let's make rash promises to ourselves or to God about turning over a new leaf and keeping all His laws. Stop and think, just as Moses made the

people of Israel do on the verge of the Promised Land – reflect on the nature of your relationship with God. Remember this – the Lord and the Lord alone is our God. Never forget these commandments. Teach them to your children, repeat them when you are at home or away, wear them as a reminder.

Remembering is not just about the past. It's about how we step forward into the future and it's about this and every moment. Now, where are you going to start? Where are we going to start as a congregation? The Lord our God, the Lord is One. We are called to love the One who first loved us and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves by sharing the good news that God's love is for them too.

In the face of natural disaster and political uncertainty; in the context of a new session as a congregation, for the Guild and for students; as we look back with gratitude and forward in faith, let us remember God in His love, let us never forget His laws and His promises, and let us set up reminders for ourselves that God is right there with us in the midst of the everyday things of life.