



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

5 July 2020: Matins Sermon

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Deuteronomy 24:10–22, Acts 28:1–16

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‘Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.’ Deuteronomy 24.18

The book of Deuteronomy (in Hebrew, ‘copy of the law’) is presented as the final address of Moses to the people of Israel as they prepare to enter the promised land. It is essentially a reminder of the covenant between God and his people, beginning with the need for total commitment to God himself before moving onto imperatives for good society. After a passage that repeats the 10 commandments, the people are given the Shema (‘Hear’): ‘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.’ Moses then commands a series of behaviours that reflect the God-given social interaction of Leviticus 18.19: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ So when we read in Deuteronomy 24 that the community of Israel is directed to act with compassion and self-responsibility, it is because these attributes reflect the character of God and of a society in which there is no divide between secular and spiritual. It is the nature of God that undergirds altruistic economic practice in providing a just wage, fairly administered justice and welfare provision for all. We learn that specific support is required for vulnerable groups such as migrants, widows and orphans, alongside those kidnapped by people traffickers or placed in servitude, as mentioned earlier in the chapter.

I’m sure you can hear the resonance with our world today. This is no surprise for these demanding verses were completed for a society in need of religious and social reform, probably in King Josiah’s time (seventh century BC), but perhaps edited around the rebuilding of the Temple after Exile 100 about years later. Yet they cross the ages, offering a timeless relevance by revealing the heart of God and the call of society to live in his image. The Bible is like a spotlight that illuminates our world, uncovering the good and the bad in our social behaviours. It reveals the state of society in heightened focus. In a similar way, wrote Bishop Philip North in last week’s

Church Times, 'Crises reveal truth. They lay bare weaknesses, they expose dysfunctionality, they magnify pre-existing problems and they show up the holes in systems and structures'. So it is today, as we face what has been described as the three pandemics of a virulent disease, racial injustice and global warming. Together they have focussed attention on unequal access to such basic human needs as food, healthcare and education and a threat to the integrity of society and our environment for the next generation.

When the twin spotlights of the Bible and Society come together we need to take notice! Starting with the scriptures it is clear that the call to holiness and love in the speeches of Moses is extremely challenging. This passage alone touches on how we conduct loans and repayment, with a need to show respect and not to take advantage. Everyone is called to bear account for their own actions, which include a particular generosity towards those who are vulnerable. Looking at society it seems that we so often fall short, both individually and on a wider, even international scale. Even before the effects of lockdown, with its seemingly inevitable rise in domestic abuse and gender-based violence, the International Justice Mission estimated that there were 40+ million people caught up in slavery today, with human trafficking generating a \$150 billion business.

It is interesting that the text begins with the injunction: 'Remember that you were slaves in Egypt redeemed by God.' The writer declares this twice, for the avoidance of any doubt as to its importance. The commands that accompany this saying are essentially a charter for liberty, for the liberation of society. Israel is called to be a society that reflects the redemptive work of God. That is our calling. Can we rise to it?

I was privileged last week to attend a provisional committee that might result in the formation of a branch of Citizens UK within Oxford. Each person attending was asked to indicate one area of injustice on their hearts. The range of subjects that emerged was shocking, from affordable housing and life expectancy through to racial and faith inequality and mental health provision, issues surprisingly close to home. Yet I was also humbled and encouraged by the clear humanity of those present, attuned to the deeper needs of their community and willing to offer gifts and time to support community life. For me this was a sign of God's image within us, offering potential for change even in the face of profoundly challenging circumstances. In a similar vein we have witnessed extraordinary neighbourly love in recent months, not least from within church communities, in addressing the needs of a society in lockdown, especially for the 'aliens', widows and migrant workers highlighted in Deuteronomy 24. I had the same sensation when serving as a military chaplain on operational duties. Having seen the sacrificial love of a young soldier for a buddy, the extraordinary skill of volunteer medics, the nobility of people who live in deep

poverty, I have been left with a sense of hope even in times of trauma and loss. It took me a while to understand why this should be and eventually I settled on the message of Romans 5, verse 4: 'And hope does not disappoint us because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit'. This expressed for me the wonderful assurance of the breath of divinity at work within the flawed nature of humanity.

'Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.' We love because God first loved us. We are able to exercise the highest ideals with maximum generosity because he first stooped to our level. We can tackle the most pressing problems of life, from the divisions within our own hearts to the fault-lines within society, because Jesus provided redemption, the clearing of a debt. In other words, he makes possible our movement from the false pursuit of radical self-autonomy at all costs to service of the common good, from the poverty of individual spirit to abundance of life in community. Christ's Church, whether located in this College and Cathedral that bears his name, or in the villages and towns of this diocese, indeed in settings as diverse as the world's (reputedly) largest refugee camp in Bangladesh or in the multi-cultural major cities across the globe, has the responsibility and potential to offer radical love for God and for our neighbour; all because we bear Christ's image, are redeemed and set free.

Bishop Graham Tomlin, speaking at the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfastⁱ this week, described the transformative power of the grace of Jesus: "At the heart of the Christian faith is the story of a God who serves us. This amazing grace is a story that has had extraordinary motivating power over the centuries and still does today, inspiring countless people...to make those large and small sacrifices for the sake of our neighbours and sometimes even our enemies, not just in lockdown but as a way of life'.

Lord Jesus Christ,
You have taught us
That what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters
We do also for you:
Give us the will to be the servant of others
As you were the servant of all,
And gave your life and died for us,
But are alive and reign, now and for ever.
Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K10Z4PGjXU0>