

13 March 2011 Exodus & Joshua The Law and the Land

Jos 1.1-9 & Mk 12.28 -34

Last week - Ten Commandments

Next week - the 'missing' books from E100

This week looking at how God's covenant with Abraham is worked out through God's gift of both the law and the land to the Israelites, which gives them an identity, telling others and themselves, who they are -the people of God.

To start we need to retrace our path of readings back to Gen 17 (the second set) when God confirmed his covenant with Abraham (17.3-8)

This promise involved both land - the land of Canaan, indeed at its fullest extent the land is described as being from the river Nile to the great river Euphrates - and also a family, that would eventually be counted in nations.

This promise was made to a man of 99, a nomadic herdsman, with only 1 child born to a servant girl. It would not seem a favourable, or likely place to begin, but *Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

Abraham had done nothing, could do nothing, that made God have to choose him. He was special only because God chose him, and he responded to that choice by believing what God had said was true. He believed the promises would become reality, and went on believing it, and trusting in the God who had made those promises to him.

The rest of Genesis tells the story of his first descendants, Isaac and his half-brothers, Esau and Jacob.

Joseph and the growing tribe move down to settle in Egypt. And then the first chapters of Exodus tells us of God's rescue mission, to release the people now called Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, and send them over the sea of reeds into the desert lands beyond Egypt's borders. As Moses leads the people southwards God provides and cares for them, and finally the covenant is ratified/reaffirmed at Mount Si-nai, as we heard last week, when God establishes that these people, the people of Israel, are His people; in the first two readings of the current section. (Ex 19.4-6)

The people were Chosen by God, they were Loved by God and they were Saved by God - like Abraham, not for any merit of their own (they were as much a bickering, squabblesome, sinful set of people as another) but because they were the family, the descendants he had promised to Abraham, and in doing so showed that He is a faithful God who keeps his promises.

And they were chosen, loved and saved by God before the law was given. The law, IO C's and everything that follows on after them, was not, and is not, the way to salvation from sin under the Old Covenant. It is a way of marking out the people; by keeping the laws, by living in a certain way, by following the patterns of civil and ceremonial rules, they could define who they were, and how they could keep their side of the bargain. *If you obey me fully and keep my covenant...*

The people are to be seen to be living in obedience to God, and in community with each other, and in that way they will become an example to the other nations. A chosen people, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. *Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Love your neighbour as yourself.*

Be different, says God, be distinctive, follow my laws, let the world see what it is like to be God's people.

The law was a gift from God, to his people Israel -a people he had saved, as we have already seen -*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

From slavery into freedom.

It is a gift that calls for whole-hearted worship of the giver. *You shall have no other Gods but me.* God wasn't interested in part-time religion, what he wanted was a love for himself in people's hearts 24/7, and a willingness to express that love in worship, as Moses did. (Ex 34.6-8) He was willing to forgive wrongdoing if there was real repentance, but he wasn't going to tolerate deliberate disobedience.

Indeed what the gift calls for is a single-minded obedience to its demands, a desire to follow its leadings, and a willingness to be guided by God - not

blindly, but deliberately, declaring that this is my Lord, my God, and he is greater than I am.

I want to stop there with the law, as Peter will have more to say on it next week, and turn to the other gift God promised to Abraham; that gift of the land - the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey, that was to be achieved - eventually - by the Israelites. Of course the land might have been in their possession far sooner if they had been willing to accede to the requirements of the law, and shown some obedience to it. But instead they rebelled against the Lord when they were told to go and take the land, declaring themselves to be frightened of the people already there, so that the Lord declared that their generation would not live in the promised land, but wander in the desert until they died. It was to be their children who would be given the second gift.

And so we come to the other 3 readings for this section, at the beginning of the book of Joshua.

Just as the gift of the law had had implications for the people it was given to, so the gift of the land was to have certain reassurances attached to it.

The Lord said to Joshua *get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to you.*

Get ready and cross are simple descriptions of the task ahead, if the listener is following the law, and obeying God's commandments. But they are also full of love and encouragement / *will give you every place..as I promised Moses. Be strong and courageous
Be careful to obey all the law.. that you may be successful wherever you go for the Lord your God will be with you.*

This land was a gift from God to the people he loves. God opens the way, parting the Jordan, giving them victory in battle. The land is given, not so that the people can exhibit a sense of superiority over other nations, but so that they might have a secure place in which to grow, to worship God, and to be a witness to God's saving power and love to the surrounding nations.

What happened next is another story! Amen

VF.