

The Bible Challenge

Meditations Week 11 (November 19-25)

Day 71: Deuteronomy 19-21, Psalm 59, Luke 17

by the Rev. Canon Dr. Titus Presler

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus in the new era that Jesus called the Kingdom of God? Jesus offers a number of perspectives in today's reading from Luke's gospel. A disciple builds up the faithfulness of weaker and more vulnerable disciples. A disciple meets repentance with forgiveness. A disciple serves without expecting reward. Alert for signs of God's realm moving toward consummation, a disciple is prepared to let go of this life in the transition to God's full glory.

The disciples' plea, "Increase our faith!" is one any of us might echo. In Jesus' exaggerated response I learn that faith is not a quantifiable commodity, but a quality of relationship. As we trust, God can do great things through us.

Think about the grateful leper's identity as a "foreigner" healed by Jesus. Mission means crossing boundaries into communities that feel "foreign" to us. As the foreigner alone returned to give thanks, so we are often blessed by the people to whom we go in mission. They help us grow in understanding God and ourselves.

The chapters from Deuteronomy offer a fascinating glimpse of the Hebrews' nation-building in the promised land of Canaan. Underlying the command to destroy cities within Canaan was concern to preserve the new nation's faithfulness to God. Provisions about boundary markers and rights of first-born children in a polygamous society seem reasonable, and cities of refuge seem creatively merciful. The punishment for rebellious children, by contrast, seems harsh today.

Biblical psalms befriend us by coming alongside and articulating our moods with God. Today the psalmist helps us express the lonely anguish we may feel when beset by people who wish us harm. As we cry out in our suffering, we realize that God holds our lives, and we respond with praise.

QUESTIONS

- Experiment with thinking about faith as trusting relationship rather than as theological belief. How does this affect your spiritual life?
- Are there “cities of refuge” in your experience? Have you yourself functioned as a city of refuge for people at odds with each other? Have you ever needed a city of refuge?

PRAYER

Thank you, God, for inviting me to share myself with you. I offer you my trust – and do help me to trust you more. You desire for me more than I can ask or imagine. Help me to trust that this is true, through Christ Jesus the trustworthy savior. Amen.

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Day 72: Deuteronomy 22-24, Psalm 60, Luke 18

by the Rev. Canon Dr. Titus Presler

Deuteronomy is the statute book of ancient Israel, comparable to the shelves of local and national laws in the office of your lawyer or solicitor. A difference with civil law today is that as a theocracy, a nation ruled by God, Israel believed its laws were generated by God. So its laws were enshrined in scripture, and they continue in our scripture.

In Deuteronomy we experience the mixture of divine inspiration and human agency characteristic of all our scriptures, a mixture we see also in God’s incarnation in Jesus. In our very different cultural situations today, some of Israel’s laws seem harsh, others patriarchal, some common-sensical, otherstouchingly compassionate, some just plain puzzling. Underlying a number of laws in today’s reading are such principles as respect for nature’s differences, support for family structure, protection of the weak, and mercy for the poor.

In Psalm 60 the community not only mourns a military defeat but also concludes that disaster signifies God’s rejection, a conclusion common among Muslims and Christians alike in Peshawar today.

Eternal human questions arise: Does my relationship with God guarantee success? If not, what is the use of God?

Equating worldly success with God's favor was the stance taken by those who mocked Jesus at the crucifixion he predicts in today's reading from Luke. The truth was that, enfleshed in Jesus, God lived through the human experience of weakness, rejection and pain, both physical and psychic. In the stories he tells and the work he does in today's gospel, Jesus acts out that solidarity through lifting up a poor widow, commending a repentant tax collector, blessing little children, directing a rich man to help the poor, and healing a blind beggar. God's centrality in existence is shown not in control but in loving companionship with us in suffering.

QUESTIONS

- A skeptic recently asked me, "In such an infinitely large universe inhabited by such chaos, how can you believe that God is there, and in charge?" How would you respond?
- Spend a few minutes putting yourself in the place of the persistent widow, the repentant tax collector, the rich ruler, or the blind beggar. What opens up inside you – about yourself, and about your relationship with God?

PRAYER

I want to partner with you, God, in your patient and sacrificial mission of love in this hurting world. So I ask you to broaden my vision, intensify my vulnerability, and deepen my compassion – so that I can work with you, and you can work with me, in the way of Jesus. Amen.

Day 73: Deuteronomy 25-27, Psalm 61, Luke 19

by the Rev. Canon Dr. Titus Presler

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by his weeping over the city and clearing the temple, sets the stage for the culmination of his ministry. Christians often wonder, "Did it have to happen this way?" and too often the response is, "Yes, it was all preordained!"

No, it was a drama of choices. As one catechism puts it, being created in God's image "means that we are free to make choices." God chose to come to us in Jesus. Jesus chose to be faithful, and others chose to oppose him. Crowds chose to laud Jesus on a colt. Jesus chose to confront the temple marketplace, and the authorities chose to plot his demise. Jesus' words as he wept over Jerusalem mean basically, "It did *not* have to come to this!"

"Where is God?" people often ask accusingly in the poverty, wars, terrorism, and ecological crises of today's world. "Right here, weeping over the world," might be our answer. It does *not* have to be this way. Following Zaccheus, we can choose repentance and amendment of life. Following Jesus, we can work sacrificially for the justice and peace of the Realm of God.

Psalms 61 stresses the choice of depending on God, certainly "when my heart is faint," but also at all other times. Self-reliance is a virtue only as long as it is grounded in reliance on God, who all of us need to "lead me to the rock that is higher than I."

The long recitation of laws in Deuteronomy concludes today with exhortations to offer first fruits and tithes in gratitude to God, both to support worship and help the marginalized. The covenant between Israel and God signified that Israel was God's "treasured people" as they prepared to take possession of the land God was giving them.

QUESTIONS

- What choices do you have in your life? How do you feel your choices are limited? Within your constraints, how might choosing God change the environment for your other choices?
- If Israel was a "treasured people," you must be a treasured person, treasured by God. Take that fact into your prayers and see if it makes a difference.

PRAYER

Loving God, you chose me long before I chose you, so I know you treasure me and cherish me. That's often hard to believe. So I want to rest in you, and let your cherishing wash over me, that I may know deeply how I am a treasure to you, and be

transformed. All this I pray through Jesus, your revelation of how you cherish us all. Amen.

Day 74: Deuteronomy 28-30, Psalm 62, Luke 20

by The Rt. Rev. Pierre Whalon

Today is all about tests. Not school exams, of course, but the kinds of experiences that put our values to the test: do we live according to our proclaimed values? And how can we know how to apply those values to morally ambiguous situations we face? The Second Law (which “Deuteronomy” means) refines and reiterates the Law of Moses, which is summed up in the Ten Commandments. In these chapters, we are repeatedly told to choose between blessing and curse, life and death. The author, who is supposed to be the Lawgiver himself, tells us in graphic detail what life will be like after we make that choice. In short, it will be delightful or gruesome.

The Psalmist has a different slant. He places his trust in God, even as enemies try to knock him down. They speak blessings upon him but really mean curses. Lest we be tempted, he warns us that status in human society, wealth and power are of no consequence. Like the Deuteronomist, the Psalmist tells us that our choices do matter.

Luke 20 is about Jesus being tested. He confounds those who would trip him up every time by reframing their questions in terms of God’s intent. Like the Temptation in the desert, Jesus is successful because he sees everything through the lens of God’s mission — his mission — in creation.

The Scriptures remind us to see our own lives, and the often-difficult choices we must make, from the perspective first of God’s intent for us, both individually and as a race.

QUESTIONS

- What in your life can you name as an authentic blessing? And what would be a “curse”?
- Take a moment to read the closing verses of each of today’s chapters. They weave together with subtle power.

PRAYER

Lead me not into temptation, O Lord, and do not put me to the test. In difficult choices, let your Spirit ever guide me in the path you would have me take. You have promised to be always with us — do not forsake me, Lord our God. Amen.

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Day 75: Deuteronomy 31-33, Psalm 63, Luke 21

by The Rt. Rev. Pierre Whalon

There are odd resonances between the Deuteronomy chapters and Luke. Moses in the one is predicting the Exile, Jesus is describing not only the Last Day but also the fall of Jerusalem. Both passages were written down after those historical events, and they seek to help people understand the shocking calamities that seem so at odds with what we expect from God, whom David in the psalm says he loves more than life itself.

Both texts tell us that we must hold firm to what we believe, for in various ways we will be tempted to forsake the faith we share. If we give in to that temptation, there will be consequences. While God is ever ready to forgive our sins, the consequences of our actions or failures to act will inevitably come home to roost. In God's providence, the Holy Spirit will make something out of them for good. Better to try and avoid it altogether, however.

The longing for God that David describes, like a wanderer in the desert seeks a drink, like a dry land needs water, is what we should strive to cultivate, in good times as well as in bad. Longing for justice and peace in our time, for right doing, and longing for Jesus Christ to fulfill completely the kingdom of God, through the creation of new heavens and a new earth.

QUESTIONS

- Moses is not allowed to enter the Promised Land, for he doubted Yahweh at Meribah. He seems to think that God is dealing fairly with him. What do you think?

- Compare Luke 21 with Mark 13. What is the same, and what is different? Why do you think that is so?

PRAYER

O God, you have always forgiven my sins when I have asked. I pray that your Holy Spirit will make those consequences which I know only too well to become the instrument of my transformation from strength to strength, through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the same Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Day 76: Deuteronomy 34, Psalm 64, Luke 22

by The Rt. Rev. Pierre Whalon

God allows Moses a glimpse of the Promised Land, from east to west and north to south. Then despite his good health at his very advanced age, he dies and the Lord buries him. It is a poignant moment of a relationship that began back in Egypt, with his faithful mother serving as his nurse. Moses was alone with God at the Burning Bush, on the height of Sinai, and in the Tent of Meeting. Now he dies with God seemingly at his side, and God alone buries his body in a place only God knows.

Luke 22 is an amazingly rich passage, with much material for prayer and meditation. Like Moses, Jesus is finally alone with God, in the garden. While Moses seems serene, Jesus is tormented by the knowledge of his impending rejection and death. One textual variant records that he was so overwhelmed that the capillaries on his face burst from blood pressure and clots of blood fell off him onto the ground, a rare but medically plausible condition.

Throughout the chapter Jesus keeps pointing ahead. He will drink wine again only when the Kingdom has come; there the Twelve shall sit on thrones; Peter will recover his faith after his betrayal, but “alas for Judas”; the Son of Man will come in glory. The contrast between his confidence with others and his private agony is striking.

QUESTIONS

- How do you envisage your death? Are you serene about being dead one day (as opposed to the process of dying)? Why, or why not?
- Do you think Jesus is being hypocritical with his public confidence and private agony? What does it remind you of in your own life?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, I am so grateful that you were willing to stoop down to my level and suffer what I must endure. Always give me that faith which will allow me to trust in you, even when I am being torn apart by suffering and doubt, especially at the hour of my death. This I ask for the sake of the Love you have shown for me and for all people. Amen.