

### *Faithfulness to the Word*

The book of Deuteronomy records Moses' instructions and teachings prior to entering the Promised Land. The journey in the wilderness was nearly over; the people who had been rebellious at Mt Sinai had learned faithfulness to God because he had provided for them over the 40 years and now a new generation was ready to live in the land of promise – which by definition, would be a life not so hard in terms of survival for it was a land of 'milk and honey' but they were not to forget the lessons of faithfulness they had learnt and Moses was teaching them what that meant.

Our text this morning is part of the teaching on prophets and it comes among material on the courts, the limits of a king, regulations concerning priests, and criminal law. Remember Moses isn't talking at prophet school to all his 'disciples' but to the people about how they are to listen to and respond to prophets – to the ones who are the messengers from God – who bring the 'now' word of the Lord – while the priests attend to sacrifice and ritual and the set words commanded by God to do with sacrifice, teaching the law as God had revealed, worship and blessing. The prophet was much more the newspaper word of God – who spoke God's word into today – a word which reacted and responded to today, to people, to situations. Moses began by insisting that the occult was completely forbidden to them. There was to be no attempting to learn God's word or will through any forms of divination. The people weren't to do it themselves and neither were those who were God's messenger. Instead God was going to continue the system established throughout the rescue of the Israelites from Egypt – he would speak through a spokesman.

*<sup>15</sup>“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers – it is to him you shall listen – <sup>16</sup>just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ <sup>17</sup>And the Lord said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. <sup>18</sup>I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. <sup>19</sup>And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. <sup>20</sup>But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ <sup>21</sup>And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’ – <sup>22</sup>when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.” (Deut 18:15-22 ESV)*

The people at Sinai recognised that God was not their favourite cuddly toy to keep in their back pocket for comfort or their butler who silently obeyed their requests but sovereign, supreme, powerful, and very present. They asked Moses to be the intermediary and he spoke the word of the Lord as prophet while his brother spoke God's word as priest. Moses had 70 helpers and Aaron had the tribe of Levi and so this process could continue. The people were clearly reminded that faithfulness to God involves receiving the word through intermediaries – a process that challenges and gnaws at our human pride which whispers and suggests that we can by-pass this way and seek God directly (and behind that view are thoughts of our worthiness before God). When God's word comes from outside of us, from another, we must stop and listen and analyse and consider whether what we're hearing is in keeping with what has gone before. Are the words themselves faithful to what God has said in the past? This question is much more easily answered when the words are not from within, from ourselves, because we are the least able to judge clearly whether our own words about God are true, for we are easily deluded into putting our words into God's mouth. So the people were to listen to the words spoken to them and then take in, reflect, and live.

Moses also spoke on behalf of the people to the prophets and reminded them that in their case faithfulness is saying what God has said – accurately passing on God's message – no adding, no subtracting and no making up – no putting words into God's mouth that he hasn't said. It's bad enough in the market place or in the home or the pub when there are numerous views about God and spiritual things to try and work out who is telling the truth. But it is decidedly more difficult to be faithful if the

speaker is an authorised representative of God – in this case a prophet. Moses' guidance about how to test the false prophets is limited – if what they say doesn't happen, then they are false. If there was me, an imam, and a Hindu priest out the front all telling you to love God and follow him in peace and service and we each insisted that we were talking about different Gods – mutually exclusive – which one of us is telling the truth? This means that you may have to wait a while and a while could ultimately be to death before you know for sure which one of us is the true messenger. Of course many messages and teachings will give clues far earlier than that but the point remains that the false prophets' false words will be exposed at some point. Again faithfulness then requires listening to the words spoken now and all the ones in the past for they will have a consistency, a trajectory that keeps one following the truth.

We must not forget also that God's Word is powerful and it – we say now by the power of the Holy Spirit – gives life and faith and maintains it and so we are not talking about following something abstract but words that continue to build up a relationship. And people in a relationship know pretty quickly if the person they are with is not saying the things he/she had previously said!

Moses spoke in terms of a special prophet – another major spokesman. Obviously, in my view, that was first fulfilled in Joshua who took the people into the Promised Land and who also said similar things just before he died – choose God and life and blessings and obey the Lord and live or choose to follow other words, other gods, to disobey the Lord and you will die.

Today we see Moses' words fulfilled in another Joshua – we know him as Jesus – we're dealing with the Greek and Hebrew of the same or similar name. For Christians, Jesus is The Prophet – capital 'T' capital 'P' who most clearly and without deception brings God's word to us. We say this because we have found in Jesus, the Word made flesh, that he is God's Son who told us that Father and Son are one and so to hear Jesus is to hear God the Father. Again, as with all religious words, how can we really know?

Well, our gospel tell us clearly as does Jesus' ministry. What he says happens. He cast out a demon in the synagogue and notice how the people respond ... 'What is this? A new teaching – and with authority. He even gives orders to the evil spirits and they obey him.' (Mark 1:27b) Jesus spoke and things happened. Jesus is questioned and debated and argued with but no one can prove that he is wrong. Time after time you get the impression that his message is consistent and I'll grant you – initially – quite implausible – that he is equal to God, that he is God – but as the evidence mounts, you are left with no other option than he is telling the truth. The world can't explain an empty tomb satisfactorily – and doesn't want to – but I can on the basis of Jesus' words and those of God revealed in the Old Testament.

Our world is different to Moses' and to that of Jesus for God has given to us his Word in an authoritative form – apostolic and written – and hence all messengers from God today can be tested or judged by comparing their words to those of the Bible. Faithfulness remains the task for pastors and for any who teach or who speak in God's name and that is only accomplished as our words reflect Scripture. Even if one had a personal ecstatic experience and a new revelation from God, that would have to be placed along side the bible to compare and learn.

Faithfulness for the hearers is exactly that – hearing, listening, taking in, and responding in obedience as befits your relationships and situation. Reading the bible is good and hearing it preached and taught helps you engage with it. Both are desirable for to only read the bible by yourself can be an exercise in favourite passages and to only rely on a preacher or teacher means you might be swayed by his own theories and ideas. God still sends flesh and blood messengers to his people to faithfully speak his word into today and we are blessed for we also have God's Word written for us so that hearing both we can live in any land as his people and growing in faithfulness.