

21st Sunday in Pentecost 2020

Readings - Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46

Introduction - Moses is known as the most humble man in the Bible, and as a foreshadowing of the Messiah, the coming redeemer is understood to be likewise humble, gentle and full of compassion. The Messiah would be like Moses and subsequently the followers of Messiah would be like the Messiah. Thus the disciples of the Messiah would also possess the characteristics of love, compassion and humbleness.

Common Theme - Love, as it has been said by many, is a splendid thing. It is something so simple and beautiful that we all seek its possession, yet its complexities astound the most able of philosophers. Love cannot be defined in any adequate fashion, yet as a topic it is one that is written about, talked about, and sung about heavily. Elusive as love can be sometimes, there is however one love affair we must all have. And that is a love affair with the Creator, our Maker and Redeemer. This love affair, which is grounded in the Bible is not abstract and mushy. Instead in a very Jewish way, God's love for us, and our love for Him, must be tangible and concrete. One of these concrete ways to display our Love to God, is to imitate Him like he asked us.

Hebraic Perspective - The death of Moses is well documented in the Torah. This account is said to have been appended to the text by Joshua. In this account Moses says that today he is 120 years old, the conclusion then is that it was written on the day marking his birth. This introduces the Jewish tradition which holds that Biblical heroes are born and die on the same day. A literal reading of the text notes that Moses is not 120 and a half, or 120 and three quarters, but rather exactly 120. This formed the basis of an early Jewish Christian tradition that said Messiah was conceived at Passover. Jesus died at Passover thus He must have entered the womb also at Passover. Jewish tradition also says that Elijah was born at Passover and that as the herald of the Messiah he would appear at Passover, hence at the Seder Dinner a place setting is always prepared for Elijah. While in truth these dates don't truly matter, and we will never know their veracity, these *midrashim* (*the Jewish equivalent of sermon illustrations*) can teach us important principles of our faith in creative ways. In this case this *midrash*, elucidates on the ideal that Biblical heroes are surrounded by exceptional circumstances. They have miraculous births, dramatic back stories, and often have auspices timing where important events in their lives are concerned. If the Messiah is to be greater even than Moses, then this principal too must be looked at in the life of Jesus.

Reading #1; Deuteronomy 34:1-12: God loves Moses enough that He buries Moses and doesn't leave him on the mountain. God is a God of life and in the reflection of this characteristic, He instructed His people in the Torah to never bring death into His presence. It follows therefore that He, the God of life cannot touch death. How then does God bury Moses? Jewish tradition ascribes that role to the archangel Michael, who ends up becoming the gravedigger of all the heroes of God. Though not explicitly written in the Bible we do see this tradition reflected in the short Epistle of Jude, in which Michael argues with Satan over the body of Moses. Here once again, though God himself cannot touch the body of Moses, his love for him is expressed concretely by providing dignity to him and not leaving his corpse on the mountain.

Reading #2; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17: Jewish tradition attributes this Psalm to Moses. This is a prayer to the everlasting God to have compassion and love for His servants and people whose lives are nothing before the majesty of God. The prayer is for God to fill our short and often troubled lives with His love. Verses 2 and 3 declare that before the mountains were formed, that

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God had said to Man; 'return'. The root of the word return is the same root of the word 'repent'. Hence in Jewish tradition the concept of repentance was created before the world was created. Repentance is a dominant theme in the 2nd Temple Period Judaism. Repent is one of the first words of Jesus when He returns from the 40 days in the desert and is one of the last things Jesus says in Revelation. Love is connected to repentance because, in God's expansive love, we have been given the opportunity to repent.

Reading #3; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8: Paul reminds the Church of Thessaloniki, that when he and his companions first came to them, it was in the humble gentle character of the Messiah. Paul came with the love of God and the love of a neighbour. This he had learned from both the character of Moses and Jesus. The Gospel should be on display in both the spoken word of love and in the deeds of love.

Reading #4; Matthew 22:34-46: When asked the question 'What is the most important commandment?' Jesus replies with the Sh'ma recorded in Deut 6:4-5. *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love God with all your Heart, Soul, and Strength.* It should be immediately noted that this is an imperative, not a suggestion. We are commanded to Love, thereby indicating we have a choice in the matter. The choice is either to obey or not to obey what has been commanded. Love according to the Bible is a choice. Love is not an emotion nor is it something that you fall into without freewill. Lust is an emotion but Love is a command from the Lord. Technically then, you can love anyone, even as Jesus says, our enemies. We are commanded to Love God with all our heart, soul and strength. It is usually obvious to see a connection between love and the heart, perhaps even with love and the soul, but what is the meaning of strength? How do I love God with my strength? What did strength mean to the 1st Century Jews? Here the Targums help. Targums are Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. Most people spoke a vernacular Aramaic over a Hebrew for everyday language in 1st Century Israel. Aramaic became dominant after the return from Babylon. While Hebrew did remain in use, it was not the most common tongue. Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible were read aloud after a reading of the Hebrew version in a synagogue. The first recording of this taking place occurs in the book of Ezra, following the return under the Decree of Cyrus. One such Aramaic translation is called the Targum of Onkelos. The Targum of Onkelos translates Deut 6:5 as .. '*you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your property.*' Strength to the hearer in the 1st Century meant your property. Your strength was everything you have. Your time, your spouse, your money, your house and possessions. How will you love the Lord your God? You will love God with everything you have and you will hold nothing back. And this is a choice we have to make as we respond to the command of the Lord. Will we indeed love God in this way? Or will we choose something else?

Hebrew Context - If love is the greatest commandment then truly how powerful is love? A commentary to the question 'how powerful is love?' is recorded in the Talmud (Jewish Commentary to Bible) which says; Ten powerful things were created in the world: mountains are hard, but iron cuts through them; iron is hard, but fire melts it; fire is strong, but water extinguishes it; water is strong, but the clouds bear it away; clouds are strong, but the wind scatters them; the wind is strong, but the body contains it; the body is strong, but fear breaks it; fear is potent, but wine dispels it; wine is powerful, but sleep assuages it; and stronger than all these is death. But love delivers even from death.

For God so loved the world ... And aren't we so glad that He did and still does.

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Deuteronomy 6:5 says to love God with Heart, Soul and Strength. Some manuscripts of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) added the word *mind*. This stems from the Greek concept of the body which favoured the mind/brain as the source of reason and thought and not the heart, which is the Hebraic concept in the body for thinking. As Jesus says 'From out of a man's heart come evil thoughts and desires' .. not our minds. Matthew 15:18-20.

ACNA Addendum

Exodus 22:21-27 - The sacred history of the Jewish People reminds Israel that they were not the initial inhabitants of the Promised Land. They had been aliens in Egypt, although initially at the invitation of Pharaoh (Genesis 47:5-6), later they became oppressed and made slaves. It is a painful but important memory. Now they lived in the Land of Canaan, a gift and inheritance from the Lord, given to them when they were a slave nation of no importance. In response to the generosity of God they would be required to reflect His character through kindness and good treatment of strangers, as well as having compassion for the weak and the vulnerable.

Psalm 1 - In this psalm the ways of the righteous and the ungodly are contrasted. The righteous and the non-righteous are different in the way that they think and act and to whom they belong. The ungodly, those not walking in the ways of God, do not belong to the 'assembly of the righteous'. Also note the contrast that those who metaphorically sat and 'mocked' (verse 1) will not be able to metaphorically stand in the day of judgement. The righteous are noted as blessed, happy and delight in the law/instruction of God which will yield much fruit (verse 3). The psalm concludes by reminding the worshiper that the Lord watches over the ways of the righteous, that is, those who seek to act in the ways of God, thus reflecting His love and character.