

Sunday 26 October 2014 – Last after Trinity

DEUTERONOMY 34.1-12 – PSALM 90.1-6, 13-17 – I THESSALONIANS 2.1-8 – MATTHEW 22.34-END

Poor Moses. I feel quite sorry for Moses really, especially after what we've heard today: he was a young, scared boy who stood up to Pharaoh because he trusted in what God told him to do; he fled Egypt in charge of a band of refugees, chased by Pharaoh's army with his horses and chariots; he spent forty years leading the Israelites in the wilderness because he'd promised them a land flowing with milk and honey. The deserts of Sinai were certainly not flowing with much, let alone milk and honey, and the people were growing more and more disenchanted with the whole idea, but Moses pressed on. And then he gets there. He sees the green hills and the bubbling rivers, the trees heavy with fruit and the wheat in the fields swaying in the breeze. And God says to him, this isn't for you. Those people who squabbled and argued and left me for other Gods: they get to live here, but not you, Moses. How hard must that have been for Moses to hear? But he was a true leader, who in due humility passed on the charge to Joshua.

And very quickly, Moses was forgotten. No-one even knew where they'd buried him. The people might have been full of praise at the time, but the history books wrote down Joshua as the hero who drove out the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. He tried, Joshua; he said, 'Remember what Moses told you.' And the people said, 'We'll do as you say, Joshua.'

Because that's what history books record: what people did. So like so many great leaders, all Moses was remembered for was the legacy he left behind. Moses had given the people the law: what to eat, when to worship, whom to punish, how much to pay in tax. A politician is known by the policies she or he leaves in place. So no-one remembered how much Moses loved the people or how he had suffered with them without food or water in the desert. No-one remembered the hours he'd spent wrestling with his own conscience over this matter or that, the nights pleading with God on the people's behalf to show them mercy.

So, over a thousand years later, good priests in the temple are still measuring their piety by how well they keep Moses' law. And when Jesus comes along, they want to prove their piety by asking lots of clever questions, particularly because that other lot (who don't understand religion quite as well as they do) are trying to do the same thing. 'Should we pay taxes?' the Pharisees ask. 'Whose wife will the seven-times-married woman be?' ask the Sadducees – and these are some of the readings we've heard in the last couple of weeks. Now it's the Pharisees' turn again: 'Which is Moses' greatest law?'

It's an easy question to ask to make yourself sound clever. 'What did you like most (or least) about Margaret Thatcher?' means 'Let's talk about the trajectories of modern politics?' Which usually turns off a conversation over Sunday morning coffee. Poll tax? Privatisation? Closing the coal mines? I dare say the Pharisees had their own list of Moses' laws in mind. Perhaps they were thinking of the Ten Commandments and were ready for a debate on which should be number one. Which is worse, theft or jealousy?

But Jesus wasn't interested. 'Remember Moses,' he said. Not what to eat, when to worship, whom to punish, how much to pay in tax; but how much Moses loved the people, how he had suffered with them, the hours he'd spent wrestling with his own conscience. Above all, remember that Moses loved the Lord his God with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his mind, and he loved his neighbour as himself.

I was pleased to see some of this came out after Thatcher's death: that she was remembered for her integrity as a leader, for the care and devotion with which she carried out the office entrusted to her, even if many did not agree with her decisions. And when the time came, how she handed over her office.

Because that was the point of Jesus' strange question he put back to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. 'What about the Messiah, whose son is he?' means 'What do you look for in a leader?' The Jews were looking for a Messiah, the son of David, to be a king like in the good old days when Israel was a powerful nation. They wanted a warrior who could take down the Goliath of Rome with a slingshot. But Jesus said to them, 'Remember Moses. Moses didn't give you kings or judges; he was the leader who loved you – but you needed kings and judges. Moses didn't want you to have to follow the technical demands of the law; he wanted you to love each other – but you needed the law to keep you in order. He didn't want you to wage wars or take your neighbour to court. He won wars, he made difficult decisions, because he had to: because we all have to. But above all he loved the Lord and he loved his neighbour. That is what marked out his leadership and that is what you should look for in any leader to come.'

So I encourage you to remember Moses because he loved the Lord and he loved his neighbour: remember each other as well not for our decisions but for our love. Moses made some bad decisions, but he loved, and so God rewarded him by showing him what he had done for his people. His tantalising glimpse of the land flowing with milk and honey wasn't a punishment, it was the reward every leader wants: to know that he had done his job and led his people home.

God knows we make bad decisions, but he can forgive those. So remember each other not for our decisions, but for our love, because that's how God remembers us.