Sermon for 30th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Deuteronomy 34:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Mathew 22:34-46

i

If only Hollywood had managed to get their hands on the OT before it was completed the story would have been very different. Moses, the great hero of the Israelites, has been dramatically saved from pharaoh’s death sentence against Hebrew boys by pharaoh’s own daughter and brought up in pharaoh’s palace; after an otherworldly encounter with God he then turns against his former protectors and challenges the new pharaoh in an escalating series of confrontations; with a contemporary version of a Hollywood car chase, Moses has escaped by the skin of his teeth over the Red Sea and as a crowning achievement he has delivered God’s 10 Commandments to the people. Surely, all that remains is his triumphant march across the Jordan into the Promised Land. Then roll the credits and everyone leaves the cinema feeling good.

God missed out badly in the unconventional, unsatisfying end of the story which sees Moses die, poignantly near enough to see the Promised Land stretching out before him, but unable to set foot there. It is an ending that has always puzzled everyone, including those who have added their own perspectives to the story in the development of the Books of Moses over several generations.

Deuteronomy is probably a late eighth century composition, traditionally thought to have been written by refugees who fled to Jerusalem after the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722BC. Their explanation is that Moses and Aaron were being punished by God for not having resisted the demands of the distrustful people at Meribah when Moses struck the rock for water (Deut 1:37; 3:23-29; 32:48-52). This version is repeated in the later post-exilic *Book of Numbers* (20:9-13). In each of these accounts the authors have some difficulty masking their sense of bewilderment at such an end for their great hero.

Some have taken this ending as a comment on the unfairness and precariousness of human life. Some Christian commentators have suggested that it is symbolic of the Law itself: the Law can only bring you so far, but not entry into the Promised Land; that will be left to Joshua, which of course is the source of the name, Jesus.

Whichever of these views you take there is no escaping the strange and slightly disappointing nature of this great OT hero’s demise.

ii

In our passage from 1 Thessalonians, Paul is now in Moses’ position as he has been commissioned by God to bring the new dispensation to the people.

Just as the Israelites of the Exodus were at times a recalcitrant lot and frequently exasperated Moses, Paul now finds a similar attitude in his day towards hearing the latest dispensation of God: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul recalls in his letter that he had come to them after troubles in Philippi (where he and Silas were jailed and beaten) and had found a similar rising opposition within the Jewish community at Thessalonica, as Luke records in Acts 17:1-9.

Paul reminds them that his new dispensation was “gentle, like a mother caring for her little children” (v7). We don’t often have this view of Paul. We more frequently quote his anger in such passages as, “O you foolish Galatians” (Galatians 3:1), and think of his many confrontations and robust argumentation. Yet here, Paul is plainly of the view that if people would just listen and give him a chance to expound the nature of the gospel, they would find it a message of gentleness, comfort and peace.

This rather reflects the occasion when Jesus referred to himself as a mother hen, seeking to gather her chicks (Matthew 23:37).

The Law has been crafted into a burden upon the people by a huge weight of Mosaic Law and the later interpretations in the Targum.

Paul spent his ministry taking away that legal burden from the Jewish people, and breaking the heavy yoke for good, to replace it with the lighter burden of the gospel of Jesus, who said:

Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

iii

This confrontation between the nature of the new gospel and the Jewish Law is the focus of our passage today from Matthew 22:34-46.

This interchange comes at the end of a series of challenges and traps set by Jesus’ opponents.

The question doesn’t look like a trap, but traps are not supposed to look like traps. That is what they rely on to work. The Sadducees and Pharisees know that Jesus frequently breaks the law – he heals on the Sabbath, he allows his disciples to pluck ears of grain on the Sabbath, he associates with unclean sinners, Samaritans and lepers. Perhaps they can shake the common people’s confidence in Jesus by showing how little regard he has for their revered Law and their national identity.

Rather than deny the Law has any relevance, which is probably what the Pharisees were hoping to hear, Jesus answers them by quoting the Shema – the daily Jewish prayer from Deuteronomy 6:5. By coupling love of God with love of neighbour, Jesus refutes the Pharisees’ understanding of the Law.

For the Pharisees, the Law defined the people of God, with the Jews inside the ambit of God’s love by their adherence to the Law, and leaving the gentile world excluded on the outside of God’s love. By declaring that love of neighbour was as important as love of God, Jesus is smashing the religious barricade the Pharisees have erected.

Jesus’ interpretation of the Law means that God’s love is not just for the favoured Jews, but through the Jews for the whole world without ethnic, political or any other restriction. How gentle is that!

Jesus then sets a trap for the Sadducees and the Pharisees which they obligingly fall into in front of the attending crowd.

By quoting Psalm 110 Jesus points out that David’s Lord will also become David’s son. Jesus received no immediate answer, but the implication was obvious enough. Jesus was being hailed as Messiah by the common people and this discourse is set after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem over the Mount of Olives riding upon a donkey in fulfilment of messianic expectations on Palm Sunday.

If the Messiah is to be David’s Lord as well as his son, if Jesus is truly the Messiah, he does undisputedly have absolute power to define the Law as he wishes, a definition that they would have to accept.

The moment is almost upon them. We are days away from the crucifixion. Will the Sadducees and Pharisees enter the Promised Land of the Kingdom of God, as offered by Jesus, or will they now refuse to enter, ironically using the Law of Moses, originally given as a way of life for the Promised Land, as a pretext for staying outside God’s kingdom? Within a few days we shall have our answer.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**December 2016**