

## PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 25 OCTOBER 2020

No 32

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### 1 **Being ready for worship**

We have been following Israel's passage through Sinai for the last few weeks. Today we come to the death of Moses, a moment of huge transition in the life of the Israelites as they are poised to enter the land of promise. It leads us to reflect on leadership, a key issue in every era of the history of God's people, no less so in our own day. As you begin it would be particularly appropriate to repeat the words of the psalmist several times – *Be still and know that I am God* (Psalm 46:10).

### 2 **Prayer of Adoration**

*When you read the reflection on our passage from Deuteronomy, it makes the point that glory belongs only to God. Deuteronomy, of course, is one of the books of the Torah, which commences the Old Testament, but a hymn which, probably of all hymns, best makes the same point about glory is To God be the Glory. At one school I worked in, this was our school hymn, though only in recent years have I looked into its provenance. The hymn was written c. 1872 by a blind American lady, Fanny Crosby. She was an exuberant Christian whose blindness did not leave her unable to see God's glory. The hymn did not at that time take off in America, but was taken to England by US evangelists, where it immediately became very popular and remained so. In 1952, the Billy Graham Crusade went to England, and To God be the Glory was adopted as its theme song. Returning to America, Graham introduced the hymn at his Nashville crusade, which launched the hymn's popularity in the United States.<sup>1</sup> It is a worthy reflection of the exuberance of its author.*

To God be the glory, great things he has done!  
So love he the world that he gave us his son,  
who yielded his life in atonement for sin  
and opened the life-gate that all may go in.

*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!  
Let the earth hear his voice!  
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!  
Let the people rejoice!  
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,  
and give him the glory! great things he has done!*

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,  
to every believer the promise of God!  
and every offender who truly believes,  
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

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<sup>1</sup> William J Petersen and Ardythe Petersen, *The Complete Book of Hymns. Inspiring stories about 600 hymns and praise songs* (Carol Stream, 2006), pp. 384-5.

Great things he has taught us, great things he has done,  
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;  
but purer, and higher, and greater will be  
our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see.<sup>2</sup>

Amen

**3 Prayer of Confession**

Our Father, knowing us as you do,  
you know us in all our sinfulness.

You know the many times when we have made wrongful, selfish choices,  
when our words have brought conflict and bitterness instead of love and healing;  
and you know too when we have failed to speak up when we ought to have spoken,  
and when we have turned our heads and chosen to walk past injustice and need.  
You know too our complicity in the systemic injustices of the world,  
which we take for granted because they deliver for us at the expense of others,  
and about which we choose not to enquire too deeply.

In short, our Father, we have failed to love our neighbour as we love ourselves,  
for we love ourselves too well;  
and in dishonouring our fellow human beings,  
we dishonour and fail to love you,  
who are the epitome of selfless, even profligate, love.

Forgive us, we pray.

We repent of our sins.

Grant us the guidance and the discipline and the power of your Holy Spirit,  
that we might grow closer to becoming the people you created us to be.

For we ask it in the blessed name of Jesus our saviour.

Amen.

**4 Assurance of Forgiveness**

We cannot hear too often the words of Jesus recorded in John's gospel:

*God so loved the world that he sent his only son,  
that whoever believes in him might not perish,  
but have eternal life.*

*For God did not send his son into the world to judge the world,  
but to save the world.*

*If we repent of our sins and are truly sorry,  
our sins are forgiven.*

Thanks be to God!

**5 Selected Lectionary Reading**

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

**The other Lectionary Readings**

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

I Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

**6 Bible Reflection –**

See below

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<sup>2</sup> Words from *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 1999), number 147.

## 7 Prayers for the world and Lord's Prayer

*Yesterday, Saturday, was United Nations Day. In preparing this material, that commemoration led me to think on the many problems in the world today which cry out for international responses of the kind at which the United Nations can excel, if only the great powers of the world will allow it. The UN was forged in the last months of World War II to take the place of the League of Nations, which had conspicuously failed to keep the peace in the 1930s. That makes this year the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the UNO. Apart from its vitally important peace-keeping role, the UN's agencies are responsible for international efforts in a wide range of areas, most immediately relevant at present of course in the matter of global health! Yet the United States has left the World Health Organisation while many other nations have acted unilaterally in the face of Covid-19. Powerful nations in the world are more and more acting in their own interests at the expense of, and often in contravention of, international agreements. So this is a most appropriate time to pray for the United Nations and its agencies. You may, of course, choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.*

Lord our God,

We pray for the work of the United Nations Organisation in this, its 75<sup>th</sup> year.

We pray for the international vision of its founders,  
who realised that the problems facing humankind were better addressed together,  
rather than apart, sharing resources, rather than hugging them selfishly for national benefit.

We pray for the General Secretary, António Guterres,  
and for all the leaders and officials of the various agencies that fall under the UN.

At this particular time, Father, we pray especially for the World Health Organisation,  
and its Director-General, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus.

We pray that it will be supported, and that it will be successful,  
in its endeavours to co-ordinate a global response to this global pandemic.

We pray for its work on other fronts too,  
combatting diseases which are little talked about in the West  
because they afflict the poorer nations of the world –  
diseases such as ebola, malaria, AIDs, polio, tuberculosis, measles and a host of others,  
which continue to be a scourge and a symptom of the inequalities of our world.

We pray for all the other agencies too,  
for the UN Refugee Agency, at this time of overwhelming numbers of displaced people;  
for the Food and Agriculture Organisation,  
at this time of widespread hunger across the world,  
exacerbated by the pandemic and climate change;  
for the International Labour Organisation,  
at this time of growing slavery and slave-like conditions in too many parts of the world;  
for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund,  
at this time of global financial crisis;

for the International Commission on Climate Change,  
at this time when national interests and preoccupations are providing yet another set of excuses  
for nations to ignore or talk down the threat posed by our changing climate.

We pray for these and all the other agencies, Father,  
as we also pray for the General Assembly, where all nations can meet on equal terms,  
and where world problems can be addressed in open forums.

We pray for the important peace-keeping role of the UN and of the Security Council.

As always, we have too many areas of conflict in the world,  
producing their inevitable toll of suffering, deprivation, death and tragedy.

Peace-keeping is always important, and is a fundamental duty of the world body,  
so we pray for the organisation's success,

and for the troops who serve under the UN flag, keeping the peace in troubled nations.  
In the many endeavours of the United Nations, we pray that all the nations of the world,  
from the most powerful to the tiniest and poorest,  
will get behind international efforts to solve international problems,  
and formulate national policies that complement rather than compete with the UN;  
and we pray that the vision of the UN's founders be respected and renewed,  
for it is needed more than ever at this time of global crisis on so many fronts.

We conclude our prayer with the prayer that Jesus taught us to say:

Our father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come;  
Your will be done  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread,  
and forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil,  
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and forever.  
Amen

## 8 Conclusion

As we leave Moses and look ahead to Israel moving into the land of promise, the Aaronic Blessing seems ever so appropriate.

*The Lord bless you and keep you.*

*The Lord make his face to shine upon you,  
and be gracious unto you.*

*The Lord lift up his countenance upon you,  
and give you peace.*

Amen.

**BIBLE REFLECTION**  
***THE DEATH OF MOSES***

The Lectionary takes us today to the end of the Moses story, and this time, to the book of Deuteronomy. Those of us who follow the Lectionary do not often encounter Deuteronomy; in fact it appears in just nine short passages across the three year cycle. It's no wonder that most of us are unfamiliar with the book, perhaps even a tad uncomfortable with it.

The dramatic setting of Deuteronomy is at the end of the long, forty year trek through the wilderness of Sinai. The Israelites are poised to enter the land which has been their ultimate destination ever since they left their captivity in Egypt. Moses is aware that God has forbidden him to enter into this new land<sup>3</sup>, but faithful servant as ever, he reminds the Israelites in five long speeches of their covenant with God, of God's Law, and of the choice that will face them between obedience to God's commands – which will bring blessings upon them – and disobedience – which will result in their being exiled from their new land. It is this overall theme of blessings and curses which leads many scholars to believe that Deuteronomy reached its final redaction around the time when first the northern kingdom of Israel, then the southern kingdom of Judah, were indeed exiled from the land of promise, that is the 8<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.<sup>4</sup> By that time, Moses was very much a figure of remote history.

While much that is in Deuteronomy appears to repeat instructions given in the other books of the Torah, the final redactor of Deuteronomy brought particular nuances and emphases to his composition. It is a pity that we do not, as Christians, spend more time with this book. Were we Jewish, we would hear Deuteronomy, along with the other four books of the Torah, read in synagogue every year. So we should be grateful for our brief encounter with this important book today.

Our passage is the final chapter of Deuteronomy, and describes the death of Moses. God has summoned Moses to the summit of Mount Nebo, from where he can see the land that awaits the Israelites in its entirety. Glimpsing that which has been forbidden to him is Moses' last act; he dies there, overlooking Palestine and in the presence of God.

*The LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD's command.*

The Israelites mourned Moses for thirty days, a moving tribute, given that it seems that the standard duration for mourning was seven days<sup>5</sup>. However Moses' death is unique in other ways too. It was "at the LORD's command". This unusual expression seems to suggest, not that God actually acted to kill Moses, but rather that God told Moses, who was still healthy and vigorous, that it was time, and Moses simply obeyed, as he had always obeyed. Further, it also appears that it was God himself who buried Moses. The NRSV translation says,

*He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.*

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<sup>3</sup> The reason is unclear. Moses' punishment appears to be vicarious due to the disobedience of the people he led (Deuteronomy 4:21; 32:48-52; Numbers 20:12).

<sup>4</sup> Patrick D Miller, *Deuteronomy: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville, 2012), pp. 2f.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 50:10. So Tremper Longman *et. Al.* (Edd.), *Deuteronomy thru Ruth. The Importance of Obedience* (Uhrichsville, 2009), p96.

but the Hebrew text actually reads, “he buried him”, which would seem to indicate an action of God.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the remains of Joseph, which had been disinterred and were eventually reburied in the land of the promise<sup>7</sup>, Moses was buried there in the land of Moab, the site of his tomb unknown forever. Leadership of the Israelites passed to Joshua, to whom Moses had passed some of his authority.<sup>8</sup>

The concluding verses are a remarkable eulogy for Moses.

*There has never been another prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. The LORD sent him to perform all the miraculous signs and wonders in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh, and all his servants, and his entire land. With mighty power, Moses performed terrifying acts in the sight of all Israel.*

Moses had never sought to usurp the credit which was due to God alone for the mighty acts which had benefited the Israelites<sup>9</sup>, and one of the sins of the apostates during the golden calf episode had been to strip God of the credit for their liberation and instead attribute it to Moses<sup>10</sup>. Yet, in this eulogy, not only is Moses’ uniqueness clearly designated, but he is said to have shared in the credit for the “terrifying acts” and to have possessed “mighty power”. To be said to share in the credit for divine acts is high praise indeed.

Without doubt this short passage, which concludes both Deuteronomy and the whole Torah, is extraordinary. Moses, whose intimacy with God is unparalleled in scripture (with the obvious exception of Jesus), whose last act of obedience was to die having merely glimpsed the final destination of his pilgrim people, who was personally interred by God in a touching mark of their friendship, is allowed to share in some of the glory that alone belongs to God. A line has been drawn under the formative stage of the people Israel. Their journey with God will continue, but a unique era has drawn to an end, and from here on in, the relationship will be within and about the promised land.

What, then, do we make of this passage from Deuteronomy, and what does it have to say to us in our own here and now?

It seems to me that there are two related things which we can take from the account of Moses’ death. The first is about generational change. Moses had led the Israelites for forty years. He had been their conduit to God. He had administered justice and decided disputes. His authority had been absolute and he himself had been revered. He was the giant of his time.

Although the modern world is far too cynical to regard any figure in quite such a laudatory manner, we can all think of situations in which a revered person, who has led an institution or a community or some other entity for a long time, eventually steps down. Sometimes the person themselves is reluctant to go, unable to think that anyone else could possibly fill their shoes. Or sometimes it is the community which has grown so accustomed to a particular way of doing things, so used to the long-term leader, that it cannot conceive of a future in different hands. In my own experience, this has been very evident in the world of independent schools, when principals may have served for decades, and their school has become a reflection of themselves and their way of doing things. However it is certainly true in the Church as well. The Uniting Church has a rule that ministers

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<sup>6</sup> JG McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Leicester, 2002), p, 477, although McConville himself believes that “it is likelier that [the verb] should be taken impersonally”. He also notes (p. 475n) that the Greek translation of the OT, the Septuagint, reads “they buried him”. Some translations specifically attribute the burial to God (e.g. New Living translation).

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 13:19; Joshua 24:32.

<sup>8</sup> Numbers 27:20.

<sup>9</sup> E.G. Exodus 16:7.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 32:1.

should not stay with a congregation longer than ten years, although increasingly presbyteries are identifying special circumstances which allow this to extend (generally) to fourteen years. In the Presbyterian Church, one of the original uniting churches, ministerial placements had no limitation and some ministers served in the one placement for decades. The longer a minister remains with a congregation, the more difficult it may be for either the minister, or the congregation, or both, to see a future with a different leader. The same phenomenon of course can extend to lay leaders, for whom there is generally no formal limit on tenure.

In such circumstances, we are not far from the situation of Israel after forty years with the faithful Moses at the helm. What would life look like without Moses' steadfast guidance? A challenging future lay ahead; from where was leadership going to come?

Our passage gives us assurance that God will indeed raise up new leaders. The writer of Deuteronomy provides this simple but reassuring account of the transition:

*Now Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him, doing just as the LORD had commanded Moses.*

As simple and as easy as that. The memory of Moses is respected; indeed, Joshua stands on Moses' shoulders, so to speak. But the transition occurs; there is no cataclysm; and the future is in good hands. In our own situation, while we may sometimes be uneasy about the future, while we may wonder if the upcoming generation is really up to the task, we can be assured that God will never leave his people without leaders. None will be perfect, but that applies to the revered generation which is moving on no less than to the new generation which is taking up the reins. God will always provide for leadership as time and generations roll on. And we all discover that there is more than one way of doing things.

The second message we can take from our passage is about how that outgoing generation of leaders is remembered. By the time Deuteronomy was penned, Moses had become a legendary figure. "There has never been another prophet in Israel like Moses." Nobody since, it was believed, had come close to his towering example. In Jesus' own time, the longed-for Messiah was often conceived of as a new Moses, because Moses was remembered as the ideal leader.

Does that sound familiar? Back to my independent schools example. I arrived at one school a year or two after a new principal had taken over. All I heard for the first five years or so was how wonderful the previous principal had been. The more time advanced, the more saintly he became. In fact I'm not sure there weren't some who, had they been of a different denomination, wouldn't have seriously sought his canonisation!

Some churches hanker back to a former minister who is remembered similarly as the perfect pastor or the exemplar preacher. When such and such was here, the place was full. He/she was such an outstanding minister! If only we could have someone like *that* again, then things would be wonderful like they used to be.

We all have a tendency to idealise the past. The further removed from it we are, the more golden are the hues in which it is recalled. (Or perhaps the more rosy, as we look back through our rose-tinted glasses!) You know – life was so much better in the old days. People were nicer, more law-abiding, (and knew how to spell); marriages were always happy; children were always looked after; food was better and cheaper; there was hardly any crime; communities knew and cared about each other; the churches were full because everyone went to church. And if only we had *now* the sorts of leaders we had *then*! Prime Ministers were men (they all were!) of character, they had vision for the country, there were none of these political disagreements and shenanigans, and none of the corruption. And so on, and so on. I'm sure you know the way it goes!

But the past was not like that at all. Historians have to face this gilded version of the past all the time, and inevitably must discard it when they examine the actual evidence, rather than indulge the fondly held nostalgic memories. Past leaders are inevitably revealed as real human beings, with all their strengths and all their weaknesses. Not one of them was perfect, and closer examination reveals that they were usually just like the leaders we have today. They should be remembered for their achievements, but their ignoble acts and frailties must be remembered too, because those are what made them human. When we place leaders of long ago on a heroic pedestal, recognising only their achievements, we come dangerously close to worshipping them. We also make it impossible for modern day leaders ever to measure up to their lionised example.

The eulogy to Moses certainly casts Moses in that sort of idealised light. A quick review of Exodus soon dispels the impression. Moses murdered an Egyptian, albeit in extenuating circumstances, fled for fear of the repercussions (2:11-15), was reluctant to accept God's commission (3:1-17), and needed regular reassurance of God's support (*e.g.* 33:12-14). In ways that the text does not make clear, Moses was also held accountable for the sins of the Israelites (Numbers 20:12). The eulogy written centuries later was clearly a case of the rose-tinted memory we have just been discussing. God of course was and is aware of this tendency we have to idealise past leaders, and appears to have acted deliberately to cause Moses to be buried outside the promised land and at a site which was quickly forgotten. There may be a golden memory, but there would never be a shrine.

Moses did die. Israel did lose an important leader. But a new phase was about to begin, and new leadership was required. Leadership passed to Joshua. After Joshua came the era of the judges, then the monarchy. God continue to raise up leaders for his people. All of them were imperfect human beings, some particularly so. That is what leadership of God's people really looks like, as for Israel, so too for the Church. As we look back on Moses at this time of his passing, we should recognise, not a paragon of faith and virtue, but a thoroughly human man through whom God achieved remarkable things. That must stand as great encouragement for all of us equally fallible and imperfect humans who have followed, that despite the fact that we too are far from heroic, God can also use us to achieve purposes beyond our imagining. None of us will ever be a hero either, but – as Moses was the first to acknowledge – glory belongs only to the Lord.