

Choose life! 12-02-2023

There are ministers who prefer to preach only from the New Testament. There are two main reasons for that. One is that The Old Testament (the Hebrew scriptures) is just plain hard to understand and the other we have been instructed over the years that the New Testament (or New Covenant) is said to supplant the Old Covenant. Put simply, whereas God had chosen the Jews (the Nation of Israel) to be his people, now he is said to have chosen the followers of Jesus (the Christians) to be his special people. Thus, it is argued, there is no need for the Old Testament. Reading it will only cause confusion.

An early writer, Marcion by name (born 85CE), in fact produced a version of the scriptures which excised the Old Testament completely. Marcion did not succeed in getting the fledgling church to follow his lead, and so our church presents us each week with selections from the Old Covenant as well as the New.

The word "Testament" or "covenant" refers of course, to an agreement. The Old Covenant refers to an agreement made between the nation of Israel and their God. The Jews don't use the term "Old Testament". For them the scriptures are an account of their dealings with God - with the on-going development of a relationship which, like a most relationships, has its ups and downs.

Sometimes God is portrayed as an old grump, and sometimes he is portrayed as a father, or friend or even, a lover. The Jews then, today, devote a lot of time to working out how they should relate to their God, and how, indeed, God chooses to relate to them. How, for instance to make sense of the Holocaust. How could God let that happen? Or their relationship with the Palestinians - or with Muslims generally - or with Christians. The development of Christianity has not been "good news" for the Jews. We talk blithely of "Interfaith dialogue", forgetting that we (the "Christian" church) have been, and still are, the enemy. Anyway, let's put that aside for the moment.

Early this week Margaret and I were reading the selection of scripture set for today by *The Revised Common Lectionary*. For this week our attention is drawn to the book of *Deuteronomy* and in the section selected for our consideration in that book I noted the words: "choose life". Not a bad theme for a sermon, I thought. Not a bad "hook" to hang a bit of preaching on. But I felt I needed to know more about the book of *Deuteronomy*. I have enough Greek under my belt to know the word means "second law" but the Jews did not, and do not, use that title. They do, however, recognise that it is apt.

Since it is a Jewish book I thought it appropriate to approach it through Jewish eyes - so I sought out a commentary by Rabbi Jonathan (Baron) Sachs (1948-2020) - Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013. The Rabbi made it clear that the book purports to be written by Moses, in which he (Moses) re-affirms the covenant (or agreement) the people of Israel have with God. It is in the form of a treaty. In the ancient world, there were two forms of treaty. One was between forces that are equal, and the other between unequal forces. We have a name for each. Between equal forces we speak of a "parity" treaty, and between unequal forces, a suzerainty treaty.

In contemporary terms, the treaties proposed with Aboriginal and Islander people are of the unequal "suzerainty" type. A treaty between Russia and Ukraine, should it occur, would be more of a "parity" treaty. From the Jewish point of view the book we know as Deuteronomy is a re-statement and summary of the agreement between the people of Israel and God established during the Exodus.

A treaty lays out a set of mutual rights and duties. God, as Rabbi Sachs sees it, agrees to limit his power and to provide for the people. What does he provide most of? Well, LOVE. And what does he get

in return? Well, obedience and devotion and respect - summed up by a living out of the law. The book of Deuteronomy, according to the good Rabbi, is:

"...in essence a programme for the creation of a moral society in which righteousness is the responsibility of all"

The deal is this: "I (God) will limit myself and devote myself to this people. I will let them be free, but I expect in return an understanding that it's my way of the highway. My people if that is indeed what they are to become, are a people who will use their freedom wisely. I (God) have laid down a set of expectations about appropriate thought and behaviour (law) and, as their part of the deal this people must adhere to those expectations."

Now Rabbi Sachs is at pains to point out that Deuteronomy is not a Christian book. He says as much ver bluntly. "It is not a Christian Book". He does not say that we Christians should not read it. "Make yourself at home", he might say. But try to remember that it is not written for you. It doesn't address your issues, nor does it address your concerns. Why? He doesn't tell us, but we might guess. It's probably because we have this thing about salvation and free grace.

Since Luther in 1517 we have accepted the line that we are in a very one-sided relationship with God. We talk of a new testament, a new covenant, a new treaty if you like. We have become taken with the idea that in this "new" agreement God has agreed to do all of the work. We are saved by God's grace. God makes minimal demands and allows us unrestricted freedom. We have a lot of "rights" but not so many duties." That, Rabbi Sachs would say, is not what Moses is on about in his speech just before the first invasion of the promised Land.

Moses is saying that during the long hard forty-year slog in the wilderness of Sinai an agreement was cobbled together between God and his people. God would provide land and prosperity. The people would provide loyalty and an undertaking to behave appropriately. Of course, the people don't always fulfil their side of the bargain and the Hebrew scriptures are a catalogue of false starts and new starts. Two steps forward. One step back. Sometimes two or three steps back.

We Christians have received a new message about God's grace and about our freedom from the law. Especially those of us who live in relative comfort and security have a religion that we might characterise as "Christianity Lite". A low energy, low calorie, low effort, undemanding faith. Yes, we sin, but we don't murder and we don't steal. We obey the ten commandments (well, most of them) and we have a set of excuses for the ones we break. OK, we do hurt each other. We betray trust, we love badly, we don't always love our neighbour but do we really need to? We just have to ask and God forgives us. We don't even need to go to church. In Christianity-Lite God's grace is available anyway.

Maybe the good Rabbi is only partly right when he insists that Deuteronomy is not our book. We read, for instance, "Choose life! And maybe choosing Life is not the same as choosing Lite. What does Deuteronomy mean by choosing life? It seems to be about sticking to the terms of the agreement. Do we have an agreement with God. Do we have a treaty where mutual obligations are accepted and adhered to. Do we have any duties to God, and what do they look like?

Listen to this:

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then

you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

If we stick to our part of the agreement, then God will bless us in the land we have entered to possess.

Grace, no matter how freely given, does not let us off. Grace does not make it any easier. Maybe it's time to get rid of the idea that we live in what Bonhoeffer called "bargain-basement grace! Maybe, *Deuteronomy* Speaks to us as well as the people of Israel.

Are we on the borders of a promised land? What would life be like there? What sort of life will we choose? What will be required of us. Not *Christianity-Lite* but *The Real thing* ". Will we make a new treaty with the Lord, or maybe dust off the previous one. Will we reject Christianity-Lite in favour of a Christianity that makes demands on us?

What does the Christian life look like? A recent author, Robert Harris lists what he sees as what he calls "The Jesus Perspective": the essential elements of Jesus proposals for a full life. Harris says that the faith is:

It is practical

- Jesus devalued the tendency to elevate ourselves above others, which is nearly universal , and encouraged us to strive for accurate perception of ourselves and our neighbors . Draw attention to your neighbor's flaws? No, said Jesus, **come to grips with your own flaws that prevent you from reaching your full human potential.**

It is affirmative

- Approach God as a self - proclaimed miserable sinner? No, said Jesus, **approach God as little children** so we can enter His kingdom in our original blessed condition.
- Struggle just to get by in a life that goes nowhere? No, said Jesus, "knock and the door will be opened"; in other words, **realize limitless possibilities by acting as if all things are possible.**

It is transformative

- Forgive people as many as seven times? No, said Jesus, **choose forgiveness so many times that you lose count.**
- Follow the easy path and just get by? No, said Jesus, take up crosses — in other words, keep **challenging ourselves, aiming higher, and dreaming bigger.**

It is hopeful

- Seek atonement with sacrifices, rituals, asceticism, and long-winded prayers? No, said Jesus, confess and repent, and simply choose to turn away from destructive thoughts, feelings, and actions.
- Hope to be rewarded with access to God's kingdom in the future? No, said Jesus, choose to enter the kingdom here and now.

When we adopt the Jesus Perspective, we are saved from a bland existence. No more unremarkable dreams, no more mediocre generosity, no more so-so morality. The Jesus Perspective shines a bright light on our limitless capacity to live fully, love unconditionally, and grow spiritually. And it happens on the path that Jesus blazed, one step at a time, one day at a time. By gradually letting go of conventional values and following Jesus' example, we can begin to accept abundant living as our birthright.

Harris, Robert. *The Jesus Perspective*, Kindle Edition.

The opposite of Christianity-Lite – the “Real Thing”, Is to choose life. That life will be **Practical** and **Affirmative** and **Transformative** and **Hopeful**.