

# Sermon

Sunday 3 May 2020

Deuteronomy 15: 1 to 15

Justice – Debt

## The Dangerous Journey

We have all been on a difficult journey. It is almost over.  
We have survived.

And we are now faced with a new world. A new normal.

And we need clear rules. Rules about how we treat  
authority and how we treat each other.

No state can enforce these. Responsibility lies with each of  
us as individuals.

## Moses

Not Boris. Not Trump. Not me. It is Moses.

Deuteronomy is Moses' last great speech. We are about to  
enter the promised land. Life will never be the same  
again. The covenant law which has got us this far  
needs recasting to address new societal concerns.

A people on the move is about to become a settled people.  
Can we cope with security and abundance?

## Huge Change

A new normal. New normals are not new. They are normal.

Our reading is from the fifth book of the Bible.

Deuteronomy. The last book of the boxset of law books called the Pentateuch

This is not a new law – or a second shot at the old law – but a re-casting of the law to drive it home for a new generation facing change.

Our reading appears to be set in the time of Moses but it was written much later, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century at the time of King Josiah.

It is not pretending to be something it is not. The author is saying, “what would Moses do if he were here”?

## Audience

This book is aimed at God’s People at a time of great uncertainty. A good choice of text for these difficult days.

## Debts

Let us quickly go through the text.

Verse 1. Debts. The seven year cycle is important here because it was the metronome tick of fallow years in fields.

Just as the land needs a break from constant ploughing, so society can be crippled by outstanding debts accumulating year on year.

Debts mount up and burden society in the same way the land becomes exhausted. It shows in poverty. There should be no poor people, we are told.

What is needed is a periodic reset. A sabbatical.

## Contradiction

Verse 7 looks like a contradiction. If there are no poor, why are we being told how to treat them?

No contradiction. We are told that must fight debt for as long as there are poor people who need help. Debt is the cause; poverty the consequence.

Ant do not cheat! Do not play the system and avoid lending in year six because you might not get your money back.

The message is clear. Do not become obsessed with possessions and wealth. Be generous. Be prepared to give up what is rightfully yours.

If you do not, the abundance of the promised land will get the better of you. You would have been better off in the desert.

## Slaves

The slaves section (verse 12) is actually about the same thing. The reference here is to people who have become slaves through being in debt.

## Foreigners

And what is this about foreigners? Verse 2. Why are foreigners debts not cancelled?

This is not jingoistic. This is about defining who these rules apply to.

We are currently in a global crisis which will need international cooperation to solve. *Foreign* is a meaningless term. We are one people. One people of God.

## Advice for Today

The message of this passage is simple. Be prepared to give something up for the common good.

You can imagine Moses addressing the people on the eve of their entry into the promised land.

A very vivid picture.

And we can imagine, too, the warning going out hundreds of years later. The audience of Deuteronomy in 7 BC.

Moses warning of the dangers.

King Josiah – centuries later – telling his people, “Moses warned us about this”.

## Settled

And what of today?

I am part of what might be the most settled generation of all time. My parents were brought up in wartime. I have enjoyed peace and prosperity all of my life and, if I am honest, I have got used to the idea that my children have a right to the same.

The message of Deuteronomy is clear. The crisis we are currently in is not unprecedented. The uninterrupted prosperity and peace we have had in this country for over 70 years, however, is.

## Moses

Would Moses be shocked?

As sports commentator David Coleman might have said, if Moses were alive today, he would have turned in his grave.

I do not think he would be surprised. If Moses were standing at the middle lectern in No 10 today, he might say this.

Do not get settled. Do not fall in love with what you have. The life you thought you deserved up until a few

weeks ago was never yours by right. It was never going to happen. God knew that because he is God. And you did not because you are not.

Let go. You will have to give things up. You need to be generous. While there are still people in poverty, you have work to do.

Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and your God redeemed you.

## Debt.

Debt is something we are about to hear a lot about.

Some forecasters say this year will see the debt in the rich world rise to \$66trn. A rise from 105% of GDP to 122%.

That will take some paying for. The message of Moses is spot on. And if we cling on in an effort to restore life to the way it was, we will find ourselves surrounded by poverty.

## End

Two thoughts to finish on.

Firstly, I cannot claim any originality in this talk because all I have done is retell the story of Moses – as it is retold in Deuteronomy.

The authors of Deuteronomy placed Moses at a podium in the court of King Josiah to deliver their message. I placed him on a podium in Downing Street.

It is not in the same league of course. I don't expect this to become the book or Tritoronomy.

The second thought of this. What if we never release our shops, bars and restaurants fully from lockdown. What if we find they need to stay closed occasionally to recover. Maybe just one day a week will be sufficient. A Sabbath perhaps.

Who says these times are unprecedented?

Amen.