

From Grudging Morality to Divine Compassion

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 10 July 2022

Holy Cross Anglican Church, Hackett ACT Australia

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Deuteronomy 30: 9-14; Psalm 25: 1-10; Colossians 1: 1-14; Luke 10: 25-37

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Our latest census tells us that only 44% of Australians still identify as Christians. I suggest that what's often being rejected here is a self-enclosed, moralistic and lifeless version of Christianity and godliness, while what we know as genuine Gospel Christianity isn't being rejected because it's never been embraced.

I suggest that people have got Christianity wrong. They think it's about arbitrary rules imposed from above that we have to follow if we're to be so-called good people, which is the same as being safe, predictable, and conventional people—and if we fail at this then we're cursed by God, which in practical terms looks very like being excluded from social respectability, and barred from the paths to so-called success. Sexual behaviour was central to playing by these rules, with a stigma attaching to the divorced, to single mothers, and in some circles to gay and trans people still. No wonder the post-war generations are rejecting this calculus of respectability.

The problem with this sort of religious mentality is that it has little enough to do with God. Instead, it falls too easily into a self-justifying exercise for maintaining the appearance of purity, into keeping up appearances and, crucially, into our needing to look better than others.

Some people who reject the Church are rejecting this whole culture, which they've come to see as hypocritical. They've realised that it was more about society's rules than about God, and especially since the Church's own feet of clay have been revealed with all that sexual abuse, made worse by institutional denial and cover up.

Others simply seek their self-justification and their sense of being superior in other ways—if that's all Church is for, then you can show what a fine fellow you are by the causes you support, the hybrid car you drive, the progressive opinions you hold, or whichever other options that are tailor made to every class and political persuasion.

We might call this increasingly discredited and abandoned option Deuteronomy religion. It's the religion of obedience as the key to divine blessing, with a divine curse as the consequence of our failure. We see this sort of religion commended quite explicitly in our Deuteronomy reading today, and it colours our Psalm, too. It's focussed on following the rules, according to Deuteronomy 30, and on avoiding shame, for which the Psalmist prays. The only hint of God's help is that the word we must follow is readily accessible, neither remote nor hidden, as Deuteronomy tells us.

Friends, this Deuteronomy religion is a big theme in the Old Testament, though it's not the only theme. In fact, we find opposition to it. Think of the book of Job, which was meant to challenge the claims of Deuteronomy religion. Poor old Job was faithful to God, and yet his whole world came crashing down. Bad things do happen to good people. Likewise, both the writer to the Colossians and Jesus lead us beyond Deuteronomy religion in our Epistle and Gospel today. Let's see how.

In our Epistle today, the call to obey and to serve God remains, as it must, but something new is added. We're reminded that God has delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of his beloved Son, redeeming us, buying us back from the power of sin, forgiving us. The religious emphasis here is different. Yes, God wants our loyalty and friendship, God wants to enlist us in serving the Kingdom of God, but God helps us and makes this possible for us by setting this *task* in the context of a *gift*, this demand in the context of our release and our empowerment.

Friends, this is the Gospel in a nutshell: a religion of demand giving way to a Gospel of grace; an apparent constraint suddenly being rediscovered as an opportunity, a freedom, a liberation. God isn't imposing alien rules on us, then. Instead, God calls us to find and to enjoy a life of freedom, of loose-limbed loving availability to others, rather than a life locked up in anxious, self-justifying performance anxiety. And if we fail to see this, to live as if joy and freedom and friendship with God are the heart of our religion, then perhaps it's inevitable when people fail to see anything worthwhile or distinctive in what we offer, and give up on Church altogether.

One problem with Deuteronomy religion is that it's emphasis on rule-keeping is easily corruptible. Ironically, keeping the rules readily becomes all about us, and how well we're doing. It makes us think about short-cuts, too: if we have to do all these things, what can we get away with? In other words, it can hinder rather than foster moral maturity. We see this in the figure of that lawyer from today's gospel. He knows the rules: loving God and neighbour. Tick! Tick! But then out comes the evidence of his flawed understanding, with that question, "but who is my neighbour". For Luke, this gives the game away. It shows that the lawyer's approach is all about self-justification. He's not primarily concerned about his neighbour, or in truth about God either. He just wants to know how to keep his purity and piety scores in the top bracket, and with the least effort.

But in Jesus' response, we see this whole calculating and peevish mentality blown open. Instead of religious rules regarding care for others, and the possibility of finding a minimum standard of compliance, Jesus invites the lawyer to share in the compassion of God. And this completely resituates both the meaning of God and the meaning of neighbour, beyond the confines of Deuteronomy religion. Jesus does it with a subversive parable that breaks all the rules, throwing purity and self-preservation out the window.

First of all, a Samaritan is brought before us—hardly the likely hero of a Jewish story. He was somebody a bit like an asylum seeking queue jumper, or a black lives matter protester, or a single mother on welfare, or a Muslim, or a mean hombre who has to be kept South of Donald Trump's border at all costs; the sort of person that conservative religious nationalists are perennially worried about. But the Samaritan is suddenly gut wrenched by the plight of this victim, who's beaten and left for dead—gut-wrenched being a better, stronger translation of *splanchnizomai* than the rather blander 'was moved to pity.'

This was an intense reaction, leading the Samaritan to cross the purity barrier and help the victim while the priest and the Levite passed by over the road, wanting to preserve their ritual purity. But not the God of Israel, and not this traveller, who found himself pulled into God's compassion. So, the question no longer is about identifying my neighbour. It's no longer a matter of how few neighbours I'm obliged to help, because suddenly *I'm the neighbour*. What we see in today's Gospel is the God of Israel drawing us into God's own compassion, so that we become everyone's neighbour.

So, friends, Deuteronomy religion is not the Bible's final word, though it's been popular enough in Western Churches, and a big reason why so many have left them. But, beyond this calculus of self-justification, we have instead the religion of Jesus Christ, and a wrenching-free of ourselves into God's own love and compassion. Here we're not marched reluctantly into ethical lives, but we're invited by Jesus to know God's service as a school of freedom and delight. The alternative is a Deuteronomy religion grudgingly inhabited or else abandoned with relief. Let the Census be a warning.

The Lord be with you ...