
LIVING THE CROSS IN A CHANGING WORLD

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR C

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“BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS”, FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C

Deuteronomy 26.1–11; Psalm 91.1–2, 9–16; Romans 10.4–13; Luke 4.1–15

Deuteronomy 26.1–11

²⁶When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ²you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, ‘Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.’ ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵you shall make this response before the LORD your God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.’ You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹Then you,

together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Safe at last 1–4

Thankfulness, celebration and confession are the key themes of this closing chapter of the main part of Deuteronomy (12–26). Those chapters anticipate the future life of the people as an agricultural community. This beautiful little cameo outlines what the people must do within the first year of their possession of the land (and is the point of departure for many a harvest festival in the past). Worship is infused with thanksgiving for the land and the fruitfulness of the land in the production of food. Land and food are blessings from God. They come by grace and are themselves the substance of grace.

By whose hand? 5–10a

But thanksgiving is not offered to any god. This God is the God of the ancestors, who followed their God's directions in faith.

So profession follows thanksgiving (5–10a). Profession gives meaning to thanksgiving. The ancestors' faith and suffering, and God's reversing of their situation are the content of profession. This ancient 'creed' is not propositional or doctrinal in character but is theology in story.

The story is about Jacob who is called a wandering Aramean (Syrian). The wanderer is a metaphor for the landless, homeless person who is vulnerable, even destitute without food security and protection from climate and all predators. The profession emphasises the weakness of the refugee in the politics of the day and God's salvation in the rescue from under the imperial power and into safety.

The story is a theology; it illustrates the being of God. God became known and accessible to Israel in God's actions. It emphasises that the worshipper has no claim on God other than God's own gracious and outgoing nature.

You once had no security, now care for the vulnerable 10b-11 (and 12–15)

The substantive grace of food and land to produce it must be shared as an act of worship. (Read 12–15 and see how the good gift was to be shared in the third year of their occupation and thereafter).

Questions: What does the 'confession' remind the worshipper about the nature and purposes of God? What is the human trusting response to such gifting?

Worship

The present experience of salvation and the care of God are related to God's past salvation in the history and cultures of long gone human beings. Worship bridges the past and the present generations and their experience of God's work and character; the experience of salvation. It also bridges the orders of creation and redemption, the

material and the spiritual. Worship bridges the realm of God and the everyday world of work and home and food. Worship binds them together so that they do not separate from each other as is so common in western thought. Humans are embodied spiritual creatures, in biology and culture and always will be so. That is the source of celebration, the joyful use of God's abundance.

Questions: What part do thankfulness and celebration play in our lives? How can we bind creation and redemption in worship? What is the place of well-structured and well-planned worship in our common life?

Psalm 91.1–2, 9–16

¹You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

²will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'

³For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence;

⁴he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

⁵You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day,

⁶or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

⁷A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

⁸You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

⁹Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling-place,

¹⁰no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.

¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

¹²On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

¹⁴Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.

¹⁵When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honour them.

¹⁶With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

This psalm is an eloquent expression the faith of the psalmist, another profession of faith as is Deuteronomy 26. The psalmist wants answers to a fearful question that is put elsewhere in the psalter; what do we have if land, king and temple are in ruins and we are enslaved (Psalm 89)? This psalm is traditionally used at the beginning of Lent because it is utterly God-centred. It stands as a stark reminder that Christianity is not a branch of the self-help movement and helps us avoid triviality.

The shelter 1–2

The answer is to look to God who provides a secure place (1–2): himself. Faith is not placed in a proposition but a person. Faith is relational. Having said that we have to believe that the person we put our trust in will respond in good faith; that they will offer a safe place for us to be.

Safe place, safe journey 3–13

Hence the confession of the past acts of God (3–8). The ancestors found God to be a refuge (see above). God also provides a safe journey for the pilgrim people of God (3–13). God’s protection is effective everywhere at every time. Surprise attack, war, violence, disease, and demonic powers are no match for God and his angels or messengers. God responds to trust (9) with protection. The text does not imply that the pilgrim will not face trials or suffer greatly. They most certainly will. But God’s power is more than adequate.

Questions: Is God that trustworthy? See 2 Corinthians 6.4–10.

God’s response to trust 14–16

God responds to the psalmist’s desire for an intimate friendship with an affirmation with a compact seven-fold response of commitment (14–16). The psalm has often been misused, as seen in the temptations of Jesus. The psalm is not about magic: many Christians and Jews have worn copies of portions of this psalm to magically ward off danger. The psalm is about personal relations. Faith is not magic; it is personal and relational.

Questions: Tease out the commitments of God in 14–16. Meditate on them for a time. What would it mean for you to live like that?

“Genuine self-denial begins with the kind of radical affirmation of trust that is found in Psalm 91” (McCann). What do you think? Where might it lead?

Romans 10.4–13

⁴For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

⁵Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that ‘the person who does these things will live by them.’ ⁶But the righteousness that comes from faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into

heaven?” ’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷or “Who will descend into the abyss?” ’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).⁸But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.¹¹The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Romans 10 has to be read as a part of a whole; an extraordinary piece of reasoning called the Epistle to the Romans. It is set in the particular argument Paul makes in Romans 9–11. To our ears so many aeons later it sounds convoluted and difficult. But he was arguing with a particular view of righteousness and the law in his own day that restricted God’s restoration of right relationships to an ethnic group (Jews) and the badge of covenant belonging as confined to ‘works of Torah’. Paul is engaging with views in his own days and that were taken for granted. He did not want simply to assert his own view but argue it in the way best understood by those he engaged. But he always engages them with God’s renewal worked in Jesus, Israel’s crucified, risen and reigning Messiah who ties all the pieces together and opens up God’s purposes for the whole world including Israel.

The main theme of the passage is the covenant renewal and redefinition brought about by Jesus for all. God has done what he had always promised he would do, especially in Deuteronomy 30: that he would, after the exile, restore Israel, enabling it to keep the law in a new way. Paul’s kinsfolk did not understand this righteousness of God and that caused him great pain.

The Goal of God’s purposes, Christ 4

Christ is the goal or climax of the law (4), the pinnacle of the story of Israel. Christ does not destroy the Law but brings God’s purposes in Torah to reach their goal and zenith in the Messiah. The result is accessibility and availability of righteousness for all who believe.

Everything renewed in Christ 5–13

Let’s break the passage into bite size pieces and begin with 5–8. The voice of Moses speaks first from Leviticus 18.5 and it restates the common idea that righteousness is found in Torah. The in contrast another voice speaks called ‘the righteousness that comes from faith’. This speaks from Moses too from Deuteronomy 9.4, 30.12–14. So this little teaching device focusses the reader’s mind; Moses against Moses!

The righteousness from faith states its case that righteousness is not a matter of human searching or striving. We do not need to have a heavenly vision to find Christ or take an apocalyptic journey into the abyss either. The word spoken and living is at hand as

Deuteronomy shows. The word of faith about Jesus and the righteousness of faith that comes a relationship with him can be embodied and confessed.

Thus a true confession lived in a living trust in Jesus leads to salvation (9–10), God’s ultimate goal (1 Corinthians 12.3). Jesus is confessed as Lord and in the Greco-Roman world the title Lord is reserved for great personages like Caesar. Unlike Caesar Jesus lives. Once again the politics of power for self-interest, violence and destruction receive their comeuppance.

In verses 11–13 the emphasis is on the impartiality and inclusiveness of God’s plan of salvation. In verse 11 Paul quotes Isaiah 28.16 but to emphasise his point adds the word “all” upfront.

Every person who trusts Jesus can never be put to shame but will find honour, an amazing promise to poor people and those of little interest to the great and the mighty who composed the church. The whole world was after honour, and would wage war die for it. It is found in Christ for all without distinction.

God’s impartiality is a familiar theme of Paul’s (12). There is One Lord for all and this Lord is not ethnocentric.

Paul brings this tiny section of his argument to a close (13) quoting Joel 2.32 and once again reinforces God’s universal plan. It is for all. It is not for a few elect who live in the Torah (or some other source of social and religious righteousness). On the contrary, anyone who seeks the righteousness of faith and confesses the name of Jesus as the only Lord raised from the dead will be saved. Paul stresses the wideness of God’s mercy.

Questions: What other forms of righteousness other than the ‘righteousness of faith’ are we prone to fall into? How can we confess and embody the word of faith about Jesus and the righteousness of faith in the living Jesus?

Do you believe the promise of vs.11? Reflect on Jesus’ life of shame and honour. Dare you live believing that promise?

The goal of Paul’s argument is vs 12–13. How can that help us to define our mission?

Luke 4.1–15

⁴Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ ⁴Jesus answered him,

‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.” ’

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this

authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ ⁸Jesus answered him, ‘It is written,

“Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you”, ¹¹and

“On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’

¹²Jesus answered him,

‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. ¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

The temptations are traditional fare for the first Sunday in Lent. Usually we read them as offering us a model for resisting temptation. That is an appropriate response: how to use scripture, how to discern the real issue in temptation, the key elements of temptation. But there are other ways of reading the text.

The Spirit 1–2

It tells us something about Jesus himself. We know that Jesus has been anointed with the Holy Spirit (3.21–22) at his baptism and immediately before the temptation passage Luke reminds his readers of Jesus’ human lineage (3.23–38) with the aside that he was the son (as was thought) of Joseph (23). Luke is providing the legitimation for Jesus’ mission in the world and among humans. He has a human lineage and a divine one.

Once again Luke points out that Jesus is both full of the Holy Spirit and is led by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is God’s agent, but that agency is always in the power of and in concert with the Spirit (4.1). This relation of Jesus and the Spirit in the performance of God’s mission needs further reflection on our part. In our church tradition in the West we have often replaced the Spirit with the institutional church. Luke however is inviting us to reflect on the way Jesus’ mission and ministry is not only the proclamation of the kingdom in Jesus’ words and deeds but also the leading, power and role of the Spirit. Hidden from sight the Spirit is an active partner in God’s mission in Jesus. More than that, the relationship of Spirit and Jesus is the foundation to Jesus’ identity.

Questions: Sometimes we make big thing of defining the church's identity by denomination or even a sect within the denomination (evangelical, Anglo-Catholic). Can this story help us here?

Another spiritual force

But there is another spiritual force at work and this force desires mightily to bring the mission of God undone. And in the wilderness this force has its moment as Jesus is separated from all that supports normal communal human life and functioning. Jesus is vulnerable and made the more so by his severe fasting. Jesus is not renowned in this Gospel for fasting (7.34) but it was not uncommon. Now the scene is set.

The first temptation homes in on Jesus' most obvious vulnerability, hunger (3–4). Make yourself a loaf of bread and feel better. After all you are the son of God. The temptation is to set aside faithful obedience in serving God. Will Jesus act in concert with the Spirit and show resolute trust in the God who provides, or will he relieve his hunger by acting out of concert with the Spirit? Jesus' answer based on Deuteronomy 8.3 acknowledges the need for bread but asserts his own commitment to work in the power of the Spirit and the provision of God.

Questions: What are our temptations not to trust God's care and provision for us?

The second temptation moves the reader from mundane to spectacular (5–8). Caesar thought he ruled all the kingdoms of the world (2.1, 3.1) but now the true lord reveals himself (see Revelation 13). The devil offers Jesus what is not his to give. He may have some control of the human order but he is no more able to control his end than any creature. The temptation for Jesus is accept a way forward that is too good to be true and promised by the father of lies! There is only one God who alone is worthy of praise and honour (Deuteronomy 6.13).

Questions: What are our temptations to believe that we are in control?

The third temptation takes place in Jerusalem so in a way the ministry begins and ends there (9– 13). Because Jesus will act in concert with the Spirit he can interpret scripture so he is not fooled by the devil's interpretation of Psalm 91. The promises of Psalm 91 are given to those who live and suffer in faithful obedience, those who, like Jesus, will take up God's agenda through suffering to redeem the whole of creation. Jesus' response from Deuteronomy 6.16 makes that clear. God is not up for examination.

Satan contests the nature of the sonship of Jesus, his commitment to walk with the Spirit and to follow obediently the path laid out for him.

Questions: What are our temptations to drop our commitment to walk where the Spirit leads us?

Further reflections

In this passage Jesus identifies with Israel's past; Israel as God's son (Exodus 4.22–23), their wilderness testing of 40 years and the testing of bread (Exodus 16), testing God (Exodus 17) and their idolatry Exodus (32), and Israel's rebellion against the Spirit (Isaiah 63.10).

The temptations mirror the conflict of the reign of God with the reign of evil. The whole of Jesus' ministry is an attack on the power of evil to bind and cripple human beings. As Luke has written his Gospel the first temptation is the rejection of populism and the use of his sonship for his own benefit. The second temptation rejects gaining power and authority by compromise; the rejection of the idea that evil is the true power in the world. The third temptation is the rejection of magic and paganism. Jesus shows faith in the care of God that does not seek power over God. So the ministry begins (14–15) in the power of the Spirit. The devil bides its time but Jesus has confirmed that he will live his life in the Spirit's power and presence. Nothing can break that bond which is essential to the fulfilling of the purposes of God.

The readings have been bound together by the narrative frameworks of beginning and endings in God's purposes for his people. The ancient people of God stand on the verge of a new adventure in a new land as a new people living within the framework of God's loving and faithful covenant.

The psalmist encourages the people who return from the exile in Babylon with all its loss and disillusionment fresh in their memories to live in the same trustful way as their ancestors amidst all the troubles, suffering and ambiguity of the present times.

Paul encourages the Roman Christians to move beyond a religious understanding that encouraged ethnocentrism as a ground for having a right relationship with God and instead to embrace faith in Christ as an adventure into God's future for the whole world.

Jesus, finally ready, has his calling and commission from the Spirit in baptism to take up the road of the cross for the sake of the world tested by the power that would destroy him and the world. What a story.

Questions: Which of these stories speaks to you? Explore why that might be. What can you learn about living out faithful obedience? What are some of the forces hostile to God's purposes that you meet within and without? What is your response to them?