

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

29.10.17

### *The Promised Land*

So the life of this great servant of God, this great emancipator of God's people Israel, comes to an end. Called by God to free his people from slavery in Egypt, Moses – despite his sense of inadequacy – faithfully obeys God and confronts the Pharaoh who is oppressing his people, and eventually leads them out of Egypt. And now Moses' part in the great divine plan is over, his work done, and he is ready to hand over to his successor, Joshua. He, not Moses will lead God's people into the land long promised by God to this people. And our passage this morning is a poignant one. Moses climbs a mountain on the edge of that land, looking over into it. I imagine that there is longing in his heart, a deep yearning to accompany his people on this next stage of his journey. For reasons that we will return to, however, Moses is denied this. He must die and be buried without crossing over. And what I want to do this morning for a while is to take this image of the Promised Land, for it is such a powerful one, and to consider what we might learn from it about this world and the next.

To begin with, we must recall that the promise of the land had been part of Moses' life ever since he was called by God. Right back when God first appeared to Moses out in the desert in a burning bush God assured Moses that he had heard the cries of the Israelites in their captivity and that he would free them and 'bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.' This was the land that God had previously promised to Moses' ancestor Abraham and that promise had not been forgotten. It was still live. And from that moment at the burning bush onwards this promise of a new land, a new country, had been firmly in Moses' purview. In a sense everything was geared towards it. It was what drew Moses on, what inspired him as God repeatedly reminded him of this distant goal. There's a sense in which Moses' eyes were always on the future, on the horizon, and it was from this that Moses took his bearings. Indeed this is what is interesting about the view from the mountain as his life draws to a close. We're told that God showed him the whole land: 'Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh...' and so on. This, says God to Moses, is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' And it's often pointed out that there is no mountain form which

all this could be seen. The passage locates Moses on a mountain named Nebo, but Moses could not possibly see from there all that he is recorded as seeing. The point, however, is that Moses here is seeing a vision. He's catching a vision that far exceeds his view, that far transcends the present. It's a glimpse of a distant day when Israel will inhabit this land and its kingdom will extend far and wide. And it is this vision that is the ultimate horizon of Moses' life.

And that vision of the Promised Land is enduring in the faith of God's people and it becomes a fertile metaphor for God's future, for God's Kingdom that will come one day and recreate the heavens and the earth. The promised land becomes a symbol of God's future for all creation. Jump ahead several centuries to Jesus and to a people who were looking to the future, a future when Israel would be strong again and where it would be ruled by a great king and foreign invaders and oppressors would be banished. And Jesus arrives on the scene and he says in effect, 'well, the future isn't quite as you imagine it, but in fact it's a whole lot better - and even now, with my arrival, it's breaking in to the present!' So when the sick are healed and sinners are forgiven and are welcomed at the table and when the poor have good news preached to them, the future is breaking in - because that is what it looks like. So Christian faith is not pie in the sky when you die and it's not a legitimation of the status quo and it's not a drug to pacify you and to enable you put up with the unacceptable - no, it's a bearing witness in word and deed to God's liberating future, when justice will roll down like a river and, and righteousness and peace will embrace and kiss, and tears will be dried. The Christian life is a praying and a living out of God's future here and now. So the promised future galvanises the present. As one theologian puts it beautifully, 'the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present...' This is what makes us restless as Christians, restless with the status quo, as the goad of God's promised future stabs into the here and now.

So I love the way the image of the Promised Land is used in African-American spirituals, the old slave songs. Take the words of this song that were associated with Harriet Tubman, the former slave and abolitionist who was called the Moses of her people as she led many of them to freedom. She sang:

When dat ar ole chariot comes,  
 I'm gwine to lebe you,  
 I'm boun for de promised land,  
 Frien's, I'm gwine to lebe you

I'll meet you in de mornin',  
 When you reach de promised land;  
 On de oder side of Jordan,  
 For I'm boun' for de promised land.

Note, though, that this song was not just about heaven, about some distant hope. It was also about earthly freedom as for Tubman and the slaves the promised land was also here and now. It referred to the Northern states of American and later Canada where freedom lay and to which Tubman helped slaves escape. The goad of the future promised land of liberation beyond this world was stabbing even now into the oppression and barbarity of slavery of the present, and the Promised Land referred to this world, the here and now as well as the next. And spirituals were coded ways of communicating the hope of earthly freedom as well as the freedom beyond.

For Tubman and, indeed, for Moses, the Promised Land was therefore an as yet unrealised promise, a future that remained beyond and beckoning, while yet prodding the unfulfilled present. And this notion of fulfillment I think is very significant for our understanding of salvation. After all, the land promised to Moses is pictured in idyllic terms, one flowing with milk and honey and where the oppression of Egypt and the crazy, dehumanising regime of Pharaoh will be no more. Here human life will flourish. Here human life will be fulfilled. And this surely affects our understanding of sin and salvation and the rule of God. Tuesday of next week, October 31<sup>st</sup>, will mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation and we have been noting that in various ways this year. The Reformation at heart was really all about salvation, how God saves us from sin and it raises questions about what sin and salvation mean today, 500 years on. And there are many ways of answering that. But this image of the Promised Land invites us to think in terms of human flourishing and fulfilment and the things that thwart these. And this brings me to something that disturbed me so much in my recent visits to Malawi and to the hospital there that we support, as in my previous visit. We went out into the villages to see projects the hospital supports and little children greeted us and they and the adults were so joyful and apparently happy with so little. Yet you can't help looking at them and wondering how many possible doctors or poets or mathematicians or musicians or prime ministers are among them, thwarted by a world of human folly and rampant injustice. And in such a setting sin is all about the forces that combine to obstruct and diminish people's lives, leaving

them unfulfilled. So the image of the Promised Land gives to salvation very practical and tangible and material dimensions, as the rule of Christ includes the fulfilling of human potential and ability.

All of which brings us back to Moses of whom we might say that his life was unfulfilled. Yes, we read that he was one hundred and twenty years old when he died and his sight was unimpaired and his vigour was not abated. And that's a great way to end your life, but the sadness is that he never reached the land that he had led his people to. It's not entirely clear exactly why Moses was not allowed to enter the land with his people. Certainly he was part of a rebellious generation who were all denied entrance to the land because of their unfaithfulness, and they had to die out before the next generation could cross over. So Moses' solidarity with his people disqualified him. But we are also told of one particular incident when Moses angered God by his wrong attitude and his disrespect and that also seems to have played a part. I have to say that it seems a bit harsh to me – poor Moses who has to cope with all the conflict and hassle of the people in the wilderness, whose patience is tried to the limit and who then gets barred from the fulfilment of his life's work - it seems hard! God seems somewhat ungracious.

There is, however, one last point. When we turn to the Gospel story recorded in the new Testament we find an incident recorded where Jesus ascends a mountain with three of his disciples and there, in the radiance of God's presence he sees Moses, alive, along with the prophet Elijah. Now, of course that happened in Israel of Jesus' day, in the land, the Promised Land that Moses had glimpsed in his vision all those centuries before from the edge of the desert. And so Moses' life comes to fulfilment. There he stands on the good earth of the Promised Land to which he led his people, the fulfilment of his earthly days. And there he stands alive beyond death in the Promised land of God's near presence, where God is all in all. And so Moses, finally, is complete by the grace and mercy of God. And that's a good place to end a sermon on this Sunday two days before the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. For Martin Luther's protest all those years ago was all about grace: about how, in his words, we get a gracious God, for grace had been obscured by the church of his day. The story of Moses tells us how, through all our faults, and our failures, our follies and frustrations the grace of God finally triumphs, and brings us through the wilderness of this world to the Promised Land. There all creation

finds fulfillment and we rejoice in the glorious liberty of the children of God, to whom be praise and glory forever. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
our Maker and our Saviour and our friend,  
we praise and bless your holy name.  
We come this morning with praise on our lips  
to honour you, who so honour us.  
We are your children who you have made in your image,  
and you love us and you walk with us  
and you reach out to us  
and in Jesus Christ you have come amongst us.  
And you long for the very best for us,  
that we should be all that we can be,  
that we should be complete and free,  
that we should be gloriously and joyfully alive.  
You long for us that we might have life,  
and life in all its fullness.  
O God, forgive us that we live in a world  
where we fall so far short.  
Forgive us that we are part of a world  
where lives are unfulfilled and we miss the mark  
and life is so much less than it should be and can be.  
O God who led your people out of captivity in Egypt  
and into the Promised Land,  
forgive us for all the way we fail you.  
Have mercy upon us, have patience with us, we pray.  
Send your Holy Spirit of life, give us salvation,  
lead us into the life for which you have made us.  
We pray in Jesus' name and in his words we pray together,  
Saying...