

The Word is very near

The word is very near to you;
it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Deuteronomy 30:14

These words form part of a farewell address by Moses to the Israelites. After escape from Egypt and forty years in the desert they are about to enter the Promised Land. And Moses gathers them all, or rather he gathers the men, to hear what the author of Deuteronomy describes as a covenant which God commands Moses to make with the people.

Moses begins by recalling how the Lord has saved his people – from slavery in Egypt and from starvation in the desert. He has never failed them. And what is more he never will fail them as long as they keep his commandments. This is the basis of the agreement between God and his people.

And a good deal of what Moses says, not read today, relates to the first commandment, You shall have no other God. (Exodus 20:3)

And Moses stresses the importance of not worshipping the gods of the Egyptians nor of any other nation. And I think this needs a little unpacking because it does not obviously make sense to us in our own time.

The first reason we cannot make sense of it is that we no longer believe in the existence of other gods. WE believe there is only one God, whether we call him Allah, Jehovah or just God. But the people of the time of Moses saw things differently. For example the author Deuteronomy writes

they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their ancestors, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt. They turned and served other gods, worshiping them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them; so the anger of the LORD was kindled against that land.

Deuteronomy 29: 25-27

This is a understanding of a world in which every nation has its own God and 'The Lord' is the god of the Israelites. It is as if 'The Lord' is a proper name. And it is wrong for them to worship a god to whom they have not been allotted.

Now I don't think we see matters in quite the same way. We do not believe that there is another quite separate god called Allah for the Moslem people, nor another god called Vishnu for the Hindu people. There is only one god. So what are Allah, Vishnu and all the others ? Are they just different names for The Lord ? Or are they complete fantasies ? Well, I think the answer is somewhere in between. Let us take two extremes. The Jews worship a god they call Yahweh. Everything that has been revealed to the Jewish people about Yahweh has also been revealed to Christians – for the Jewish scriptures – including Deuteronomy and the Psalms – are also part of our scriptures. But something more has been revealed to Christians – that God is Christ. So in that sense I think we can say that Jews and Christians worship the same god but that the Jews do not see him as his, or her, fullest self.

But to go to the other extreme, the Aztecs of South America practiced human sacrifice to appease their angry god. I think if we came across an Aztec in our time we would say that whatever we might have in common, his view of god was so distorted that we might reasonably say that it is completely false. But lest we feel too smug about not practising human sacrifice let us remember that on at least two occasions human sacrifice is referred to by Old Testament writers with no sense of disapproval (Abraham and Isaac Genesis 22:2 and Jethphah's daughter Judges 11:39).

But I would suggest most other religions fall somewhere between the Jews and the Aztecs. Their vision of God is distorted but not necessarily unrecognizable. So when people of different faiths worship we all have a vision of God but the vision is never quite the same.

On two occasions over the last few months, Christians and Muslims have worshipped together at Saint Jameses Church, in both cases following religious massacre is on the other side of the world. When the Muslims prayed aloud I was struck how easy it was for me to say our men at the end. When I prayed aloud I was careful not to refer to Jesus as God so that it is possible for the Muslims to say 'Amen' at the end

But for all that we have in common, there are matters where we disagree. In the end there are some things that we believe are true and some that we believe are false. So, for example the teachings of Islam deny they Jesus died for my sins and assert that we can go to heaven by living a good life. And no matter how many values Christianity and Islam may share, on this one they disagree. And if it is true that I cannot earn my way into heaven then any assertion that it is true is damaging.

But if it is true that we cannot earn our way into heaven, it is true for all people whether they believe in god or not. And even in the secular world there is a consequence that results from trying to earn our way to heaven. We become anxious or depressed and lacking in self esteem. And the world of work reinforces this as people become valued not for what they are but for what they do. And slowly we create a hell on earth. There is now considerable evidence that anxiety and depression are increasing in our country, particularly among the young. I would suggest that this might be a consequence of valuing people for their productivity, their efficiency, their outputs, and even more dangerously in the case of children, for their exam results. That is what worshiping false gods means. It is not about images and statues: it is about the values that lie deep in our hearts. And for the last 40 years consumerism has become deeply rooted in our hearts as we pursue a dangerous quest for efficiency and productivity. As Jesus said,

Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.

Mark 7:18-19

But how do we know how God wants us to live? Let me return to the words with which I began:

The word is very near to you;
it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Moses prefaces this statement by saying that it is unnecessary to go either up to the heaven or across the sea. The word is right here. Sometimes we think that the secret of eternal life is very esoteric, carefully hidden way, known to only a few wise men and women. I remember in the late 1960's

the Beatles traveling to India consult gurus. Moses will have none of it. The secret of eternal life is here, in your heart and in your mouth.

I take it that 'in my mouth' means in the words of the scriptures that I recite. There is a very good Anglican tradition of reading the scriptures daily and out loud. Somehow reading them aloud makes them more real. And God is present in the scriptures not in the sense that he literally tells me what to do but in the sense that through the words of scripture we come to know the nature of God and as we come to know the nature of God so we come to take on the nature of God and the mind of Christ.

But Christians would see in Moses words a significance that Moses would have missed. Moses says 'the word is very near to you;' and for Christians, particularly Christians who know St John's Gospel, 'the word' is very clearly the Word with a capital W – Jesus Christ, the Word who was made flesh.

But the word is also in our hearts. Paul put it like this:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

Romans 1:19-20

That is to say that those who have no access to the scriptures can know of God's ways thorough their consciences, through their intellectual abilities, through their senses through their intuition –through everything God has given to them.

So knowledge of God comes to us in two ways: though what is revealed in the scriptures and through what is revealed by science and common observation. And all those are to hand, present with us throughout our lives. All we have to do is to open ourselves to receive them.

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N Clews
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