

What does it take to make a decision with and for everyone?

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 ESV

¹⁵ “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

Introduction

Message

Very Big Decisions Together

Can you think of the biggest group decision you have ever been part of? Have you made a decision with others that would determine matters for years after you died and the lives of children yet unborn?

I think of a family or even a couple deciding to emigrate as something like this.

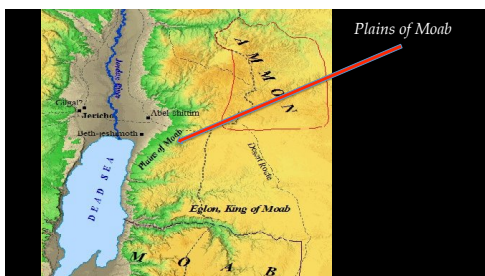
The referendums in Scotland and the United Kingdom in recent years might approach this in lasting impact across generations?

Those recent referendums show that the bigger the decision and the more people involved, the harder it becomes to get a clean lasting outcome.

What we are more used to is everyone deciding for themselves as individuals saying ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. But that can involve people withholding involvement or undermining the process by ignoring the issue altogether. Low voter turnout is hard to interpret. In those cases the big issue or question simply falls flat for lack of interest. Many urgent issues run the risk of that happening. Unless everyone cares and agrees, not much can happen.



Text



Our first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy is set in a big moment of national decision like this. After 40 years of leadership Moses is preparing to hand over leadership to his assistant Joshua and then lay down in death. Through the 40 years of wilderness wandering Moses has brought the people to the edge of the Land of Canaan where they now stand on the Plains of Moab beside the Jordan Valley.

Those who remember Egypt have died and a new generation has grown up who do not remember slavery in Egypt. This generation have lived their whole life as nomads on the move to some place Moses said would become their home land as the LORD had promised Abraham.

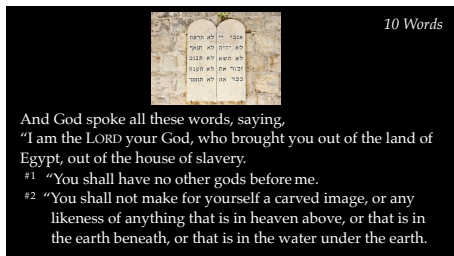
The basic question that needs to be asked of those alive that day on the plains of Moab is this: After 40 years of learning to walk with the Lord God as his covenant people, are you all going to continue being faithful to the LORD and his covenant when you move into the land before you?

As he looks across the Jordan valley, Moses is taking the whole generation of Israel, men, woman, bonded servants and children with those as yet unborn to a point of joint and binding decision. This is not just an issue for the chiefs or some ruling elite everyone else would follow. This was holy inclusive democracy. What now my people? Can you speak with one voice?

You can find the first edition of the covenant made 40 years earlier with their parents and grandparents set out in Exodus 20 where it begins with the 10 Commandments. This was entered into at Mount Sinai not long after being rescued from Pharaoh and his chariots.

The terms of Israel's covenant with the LORD in this first edition were delivered as a simple imperative diktat.¹ The LORD had rescued a people and because of this benign conquering for liberation, he had the right to now command their obedience. They were his people to command for his purposes.

As I read the opening of this listen to the strong imperative prohibitions in the first 2 commandments from Exodus 20:



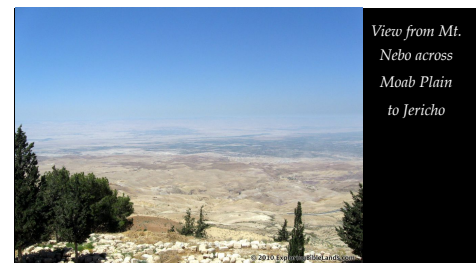
And God spoke all these words, saying,

- ² “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.
- ³ “You shall have no other gods before me.
- ⁴ “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

That generation did not manage to be faithful to this covenant in obedience to the LORD.

Meanwhile the LORD was faithful to the descendants of Abraham and his promises to Moses even if that required passing over of a whole generation and raising a new one to try again.

So on this day, after going through many things, the People of Israel stand on the edge of the great wilderness on the plains of Moab in sight of the promised land. As it is today, the ancient city of Jericho is visible 27 km across the valley. The Dead Sea is visible. The Jordan River Plain is visible. This is what they and their parents have been preparing for.



The thing I want us to grasp here is that what was being asked was a total collective and full-hearted commitment by those there and -this is the point so easily missed- binding on the people as a people in generations to come. People, are you going to affirm the Covenant the LORD made with your parents?

¹ Apodictic language.

The book of Deuteronomy shows that in this process of covenant renewal -40 years after Sinai- the Law of the Covenant was presented in a very different way from how it reads in Exodus. Instead of an imperative re-play the law is preached. It is presented as something beneficial for this generation to choose.

Today's passage is representative of this preached law:

Deuteronomy 30.15-20

"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them,

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People, if you choose to obey the LORD as he commands it will go well for you and your children in the land but if you do not obey the LORD as he commands, you shall not live long in the land.

This is a choice for you as a people that requires a solid, active and collective decision.

The result will be experienced collectively and as long as you are a people through your generations.

Reflection

I have traced out this story because it is so far from where we are today. Our world today does not function out of deep whole-hearted commitments held by whole populations of men, women and children of a whole nation.



We are used to fragmentation and rely on politics and economics to arrange things in a way that make things possible. As if to illustrate that Margaret Thatcher said: "Society, there is no such thing!" and the White House in Washington DC is currently occupied by a man who celebrates the art of the deal!

The next 1400 years of Jewish History, thus most of the Old Testament, is about the rise and fall of Israel's heart commitment to the covenant of the LORD. More than once it would involve losing the land until a new generation would return to it to begin again.

Today we are here as church in direct continuity with that first covenant and facing similar issues. We come to church as individuals and work towards living our common fellowship as the baptized in the New Covenant with Jesus Christ.

Once in the door and living as church we begin working out the tensions between ourselves as individuals and our collective fellowship in Jesus Christ. The local church is not your whole life but usually a special part of it. Right?

This is to be seen in many things in local churches and even more so in our church because of a changing congregation and cultural diversity.

I learned a long time ago to never expect one size to fit all. Nothing will be adopted in a uniform way.

Then occasionally something comes along where the words of Moses to the second generation in Deuteronomy do apply and a collective decision is required or you just may go under as a people.

Application

Those who lived through World War 2 may remember the need for their whole nation to be mobilized if that war was to be won.

Can you think of anything like that in the world today?

I am thinking about a flu epidemic caused by a new strain of corona virus.

It occurs to me that something as infectious as the corona virus will not take much notice of individual choices and preferences. To overcome or avoid something like that takes a much more corporate response than our individual choices. It's a public health issue.

Because there is an infectious two week incubation period before symptoms show the Nova Corona Virus -or Covid 19- could be spreading well ahead of people being aware it is around.

The descriptions I have heard suggest it is very easily aerosoled or made airborne so meters of distance between people are no protection even if you avoid direct contact. This makes isolation very difficult.

Our challenge as church is that fellowship is all about being together and celebrating our connectedness.

Can we still do this?

I have two thoughts:

1. If an epidemic really broke out we would probably not meet at all.
 - a. We would look into an internet link such as zoom.
2. Even without an outbreak of this corona virus happening we should learn to take measures that make infection less likely until risk has passed.

Q How might we make flu infection less likely?

A1 Change our collective behaviour

A2 Give options for people to manage the risk.

A3 Think about Children

Q How might we make flu infection less likely?

A1 Change our collective behaviour

A2 Give options for people to manage the risk as they see it.

A3 Think about Children

Changing our collective behaviour

Some collective measures with options for adults and children:

1. Hand cleaning.
 - a. Before services everyone wash hands.
 - i. Sanitation bottles made available or use soap and water.
 - ii. Hands sanitized again by those ministering communion prior to ministry.
2. Avoiding skin contact with your own face and, when necessary, other's hands etc.
 - a. Perhaps non-touch Peace or wash hands afterwards.
3. Use tissues if coughing or sneezing.
4. Allow those who wish to wear facemask.
 - a. Apparently this does more to contain any virus than safeguard against it.

Q How might we make flu infection less likely?

A1 Change our collective behaviour

1. Hand cleaning.
2. Avoiding skin contact.
3. Use tissues if coughing or sneezing.
4. Allow those who wish to wear facemask.

Can we do that together?

Questions??

Then some care in the way we minister communion:

1. Understand that since the Reformation communion in our church is offered in both bread and wine but the church teaches that communion in one form is still full communion. You are free to choose only one form or both. Bread only is OK.
2. You already have the options of a shared cup or a cup for to dipping your bread.
 - a. If you dip your bread keep fingers totally out of the wine – no exceptions!
 - b. From now on the bread will be broken in strips to make this easier than might be the case with small squares.

Q How might we make flu infection less likely?

A2 Options to manage the risk.

- You are free to choose Communion in only one form or both.
- Keep fingers totally out of the wine.

Questions??

So you can decide if and how you take part in communion.

Then come the children

We have the practice of including children at the gathering around the table. For those who wish, the priest prays a blessing usually involves tracing a cross on the forehead with an individual prayer.

To minimize physical contact the priest will during periods of epidemic risk not touch the child's head but offer a hand raised in blessing.

Q How might we make flu infection less likely?

A3 Think about Children

- A hand raised in blessing.
- Parents explain to their children what is happening at communion and what to do.

Where parents can really help is explaining to their children what is happening at communion and what the children should do. Don't be afraid to talk to your children at this time.

While we are here, I would say that currently about half of small children reach for the communion plate when they should not. That suggests to me that either:

- the children have not had breakfast!
- they have not been told what communion is about
- they are used to taking the food they see.

Apart from hygiene concerns, children grasping for the communion bread can become really embarrassing or worse. Could I ask, if you bring your children to communion please brief them and guide them so that there is appropriate respect and reverence, even when they do not receive the bread.

Conclusion

Today we went back around 3400 years to when Moses led the people in a national covenant renewal on the Plains of Moab on the threshold of a new chapter in their history.

Fast-forward to today and we as a church are not well placed to do that. We meet and greet, we share life as we can and we move as free agents within the collective.

Then comes something that requires more collective resolve and Corona Virus might be it, especially around our practice of communion.

Let's use this as an opportunity to upgrade how we come to communion so we choose life and blessing for all. Today we can start taking measures that may or may not become really important in weeks to come.