

DEUTERONOMY 4.1-2, 6-9; JAMES 1.17-27

The book of Deuteronomy can be very blunt, and today's reading from chapter 4 is an example of this. It comes in the narrative of the Exodus where Moses has just stood looking over the Jordan to Canaan. And full of awe and anticipation, he bursts into what is almost a song of praise:

'O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your might; what god in heaven or on earth can perform deeds and mighty acts like yours!'

And then he makes a request:

'Let me cross over to see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon.'

And God says... 'No!' In fact, the text has God getting rather grumpy with Moses. He tells him, 'have a good look, because you won't be going there'. And at that point Joshua is given the charge to lead the people to the land of promise.

The Law as blessing and curse

So when Moses turns round and gives the people the stern, weighty, words that we've heard read this morning, we hear them as coming from someone who has been shaken and knocked back. They are words that come from experience. Years back, Moses failed, understandably, but spectacularly. And he is now reaping the consequences.

So now, having looked long and hard on the Land he ventured for, but will not receive Moses speaks with an eye to the long term. His emphasis is quite simply on the necessity to obey the Law. It's part of an extended preface to the Ten Commandments that follow.

His message: if you want to possess the land of Promise (as I will not), and stay in it, and enjoy it, then you must keep the instructions that I will give you. The Law comes from God, and it is given for your blessing. It is the way of "life" for you.

Yet, taken as a whole, the passage draws a very sharp line. The Law is a blessing, but it is also a curse. Keep the Law and you will live and prosper; abandon it and you will perish.

Moses' words are concerned with the longevity of the community; he wants it to prosper – not just today, but beyond that, into the next generation – among the 'children, and the children's children'.

It's this emphasis on passing faith to 'your children, and your children's children' that I want us to consider. It is a fundamental issue, and appears repeatedly in Deuteronomy.¹ Time and again, the text speaks of 'your children, and your children's children'.

Priority on children

Perhaps this is one of the first challenges to confront us in the text: how important it is that we recognise the absolute priority of intergenerational renewal!

It's interesting to think about how things have changed in NZ church life in this respect. A hundred years ago, or so, the emphasis on transmitting the faith to children was so strong that you could almost go so far as to say that NZ Christianity was primarily for children.

Among other indicators, nearly three-quarters of children were enrolled in Sunday school, or went to a Catholic school at a time when around 25% of adults claimed to be regular church-attenders. There were particular social factors at work, but this system only flourished because of huge levels of investment – financially and in terms of human effort. And Presbyterians were at the forefront of all of this.

There were certainly weaknesses as well as advantages in the model. But the contrast with recent times is quite striking. By the middle of the twentieth century, churches were directing a lot more effort into older youth. Later still, adult education, home groups, and a great many other activities were shaped primarily around the perceived needs of more mature members. These changes were not necessarily unwarranted or illegitimate. But the contrast with earlier times remains striking.

Challenges for contemporary Christian communities

We need to be quite realistic about the contemporary challenges we face. They are very different from those of a hundred years ago – and certainly from those of Moses' time. Tribal, clan-based societies have distinct advantages when it comes to establishing and

¹ For example, Deut 4.25; 5.29; 6.1-3; 6.20-22

preserving values. I was struck by this watching Jonathan Dimpleby's journey through Russia on TV recently, which some of you may also have seen. In the episode I saw, he was travelling through the Caucasus, participating in a dramatic wedding ritual that was essentially unchanged in many hundreds of years.

Compare that with the highly mobile, individualised society we live in. Today, even where children remain actively involved in Christian communities, it is increasingly uncommon for families to worship together. Expressing ones' own tastes, and choosing peer groups and communities seem to be expected elements of maturation – for our children as much as for anyone else's.

Family and faith

One of the main contexts in which faith moves to our "children's children" is through our families. I've been talking with friends recently about their experiences of growing up in families of faith, and the kinds of things that they found helpful in their Christian experience.

Interestingly, they commented that one of the main influences was simply knowing for sure that faith really mattered in their house. Their parents and families had incredibly different ways of expressing this. But children are very sharp at picking up what really matters to parents, just as they pick up on our idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies.

One friend told me that her parents were not very bold people, but she always knew that the love of God was their source of hope and strength, and they talked about it often. Another mentioned that his parents were more practically oriented and actually didn't say very much about what faith meant to them personally. But it was always clear to him anyway.

I think the point here is that faith is 'caught' as much, or more, than it is 'taught'. It relies on example, experience and environment. We cannot easily pass on what do not know; or express what have not felt; or show what we have not done.

There is also this sense that we need to be intentional. We need to be able to express faith, and cultivate an environment for it, in ways that are deliberate – not necessarily always

through teaching (in the sense of direct instruction), but also through rituals, and habits of time, worship and celebration.

A little further on in Deuteronomy there is this wonderfully evocative point, where, in connection with the Passover feast we read Moses saying: “When your children ask you ‘what does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD,’” and so on, and so on.

Now, in recent times, strong forces have tended to make many of us very sensitive about “overdoing it” in terms of religion – we have been worried about appearing too sectarian, or of indoctrinating children, or coercing them. These concerns are legitimate and understandable. But they can also be debilitating.

This Passover instruction is a reminder that we need markers of identity. It also reminds us of the formative power of rituals and celebrations. These moments and experiences actually shape the way that we think, and interpret the world. They also draw us into something bigger than ourselves, and so generate problems and questions, and opportunities for engagement.

Whether they come from ritual or not, our willingness and ability to respond to children’s actual questions and concerns is really important. One of my friends said that he has always been grateful that his dad answered his questions. My friend said that his father always answered in a way that said – “well some people think this, and others think that, but I believe this because....” He said, his dad took his questions seriously, and he answered in a way that prepared him for a time when the world became grey. It allowed him to appreciate that people can interpret and experience Christian faith in varied ways, and still be highly committed.

These things are not simply issues for parents of young children. For one thing, extended families have a part to play. It is often grandparents, aunts, and uncles who can communicate as effectively as parents, albeit in slightly different ways. Rituals and celebrations, listening, questioning and sharing with children about faith can often seem especially fresh and significant when it comes from a loved and trusted source who’s not quite so implicated in the shenanigans of day-to-day life.

More than this, these processes are not only about small children. They are relevant for everyone. And they actually depend on the whole church community. The truth is that it is very difficult for children to come to a mature appreciation of Christian faith only from within their biological families, even extended ones.

Church families

One of the names the NT gives to the followers of Jesus is 'the family of God.' The metaphor suggests various things, but a crucial one is this: that the whole community has a critical part to play in the nurturing of faith. Families do not exist only for the sake of children. But where they are not noticed and nurtured, something is clearly deficient.

I take it for granted that we provide particular programmes for children, and that these are helpful and necessary. We are exceptionally blessed in the calibre of our programmes here at St John's, and of the people running them. And I know we are consciously thinking about what we offer younger members, and how our services can be function more effectively. Obviously, there's more that can be done.

But there are other areas in which all of us make a direct difference.

We were fortunate to grow up in North India, where my father was a medical missionary. I was the youngest, and have few memories of that time. But what I do remember is the large number of mostly older (at least they seemed older to me at the time), single honorary 'aunties' that we inherited, and who stayed a part of our lives after we returned to NZ. We were loved and cared for by them, and are still in touch with some today. We admired them, and their commitment, energy, and fun, and felt the love of God through their love and interest. And I imagine that we were also significant to them.

And as a teenager in Christchurch, one of the people whose example had the deepest effect on me was an elderly Scottish woman called Isabel. Again, she was a very dear friend of our family, and took a great interest in each of us. People often talk about "dour Presbyterians", yet she was anything but. Warm, generous, and cheerful, she was an absolute delight. She was also a tiny wee dot.

When she read the Bible in church, you could feel the depth of meaning and understanding. And when she prayed, it was impossible not to pray with her; you could feel her joy, and her gratitude and confidence. You also knew that these were real, and did not belong only to her.

My point is that Christian faith was passed down in meaningful ways through friendship with people who were not family in the usual sense, and who in many ways were not really much like me at all.

These were people who took a risk in getting to know young children and teenagers who were not their kin.² We were treated as true family of God, and this opened doors for influence by word and example.

Risk-taking and extending the family of God

My family experience tells me that this kind of risk-taking, love and interest can also make a difference to children who do not come from families of faith.

My grandfather grew up in large family of pretty humble means in the working-class suburb of Addington in Christchurch. His father was alcoholic, and quite hostile to Christianity. As a young lad, my grandfather needed to find work to supplement the family income. The work he did get offered was at a local corner dairy, but it came with a proviso. He could have the job, so long as he came to Sunday school and church.

Well he took the job, and kept his word. In the long-term, the new relationships and examples he experienced through church were transformative. He was converted, and ultimately became very involved in Anglican affairs in Christchurch. My grandparents reared five children, and new cycles began.

I'm not entirely sure what to make of all aspects of this story now. For one thing, I'm not convinced that the kind of employment arrangement devised would be exactly legal now. But what I think we can say is that faith is often passed on most effectively when there is a

² Discuss the issue of how important it is for children and young people to be noticed, for older generations to take an interest in them. If we can't do this for them, what hope for newcomers? Takes risk and effort; sometimes feel like don't know what to say, or how to connect, but this comes as we make a start.

strong conviction that it matters. But also, when people are prepared to take risks, and make investments in one another.

James: transmission through ‘saying’ and ‘doing’

Getting back to the conversations I’ve had with friends recently. It’s interesting that what really stands out from those is that three particular factors seem to have been profoundly influential:

The first factor was the example of someone close who demonstrated committed faith in action;

Second, was the example of someone close who could articulate the nature of Christian faith;

Third, they experienced an environment of faith was deliberate and consistent – even though the shape this took varied wildly.

This is where I think our reading from James is so helpful. It’s not that James is particularly talking about passing on faith to the next generation. But, it speaks explicitly about the necessity for words and actions to come together in the kinds of ways just mentioned.

There is also much wisdom in the kinds of practical advice James offers, in terms of creating the kind of loving environment where faith can be nurtured:

“Everyone must be quick to listen, but slow to speak and slow to become angry”
(1.19)

“Submit to God and accept the word that is planted in your hearts” (1.21)

But, the central message of the passage is that “pure and genuine religion” involves disciplined speech, and is marked by care for the weak and vulnerable (1.26-27). Our words matter, as does our willingness to express love in practical ways – especially to those who need it most.

The goods here on the communion table are, I think, a powerful symbol. At one level, they are a sign of commitment to care for those who need it, especially those who suffer. The process of its construction is also a wonderful example of the meeting of words, actions, and intent.

As we know, our children have been hearing about the love of God, and the ways this love fuels our commitment to generosity and service. They have been working hard and making preparations, and today they will make their offering.

But, they have also been witnessing your generosity and commitment. These are your offerings, and they have come from your acts of friendship. Yesterday, I know some of the kids had great fun travelling round raiding your pantries: lots of hi-jinks and laughs, and good memories. This is all part of belonging in a family of faith.

In doing things like this, we are sharing God's ways with one another.

When it comes down to it, we are fallible bearers of the message of Christ. And we cannot ultimately control how the generations that follow us will respond. Faith is a gift. It cannot be coerced, or worried into existence. But it is a gift that we share freely with one another, because that is its purpose. And because we know that faith has the best chance of being passed on when it is richly experienced – where words and actions are in harmony.

And it is faith that we pray will be passed on.

Institutions, morality, belief; these are all important. But to understand the love of God for us in Jesus, and be formed by this love, is to live in the freedom for which we were made. May this faith take root in us deeply, and in "our children, and our children's children".

Amen.