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May 25th: Deuteronomy 26 & Luke 13:10-35

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How to overcome covetousness. Sabbath, mustard, leaven, and the narrow way.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 26 1. And you shall make response before the Lord your God. 2. A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number. 3. And there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous.

4. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and humiliated us, and laid on us hard labour. 5. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers. And the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

6. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. 7. And he brought us into this place, and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 8. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.

9. And you shall set it down before the Lord your God, and worship before the Lord your

God. 10. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you, and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

11. When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your towns and be filled, then you shall say before the Lord your God, I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all your commandment that you have commanded me. 12.

I have not transgressed any of your commandments, nor have I forgotten them. I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or offered any of it to the dead. 13.

I have obeyed the voice of the Lord my God. I have done according to all that you have commanded me. Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.

14. This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and rules. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul.

You have declared today that the Lord is your God, and that you will walk in His ways, and keep His statutes and His commandments and His rules, and will obey His voice. And the Lord has declared today that you are a people for His treasured possession, as He has promised you, and that you are to keep all His commandments, and that He will set you in praise and in fame and in honour, high above all nations that He has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the Lord your God, as He promised. Deuteronomy chapter 26 marks the conclusion of Moses' second sermon, which began at the end of chapter 4. Within this sermon he laid out the Ten Commandments, and then commandment by commandment unpacked their import.

The point of all of this was to encourage Israel and its leaders to meditate upon the law. When we first see the Ten Commandments, they can seem fairly commonsensical, and we might wonder why they are seen to be so important. However, I hope that as we draw to the end of Deuteronomy's unpacking of them, we're beginning to appreciate their power as a source of wisdom.

This chapter concludes the great sermon of Deuteronomy then, and the central section of the entire book. However, it is much more than simply another collection of laws, such as those we've seen for the preceding sections. Much as chapters 6 to 11 is an extended sermon upon the general theme of the First Commandment, but one which sums up the entire meaning of the Covenant, so chapter 26 is the same for the Tenth Commandment, and it returns to the theme of worship.

This chapter can be divided into three sections. The first section, verses 1 to 11, deal with the theme of God's grace to Israel and to Israelites as they were made fruitful within the land. The second section, verses 12 to 15, concern the obedience of Israel in response.

And then verses 16 to 19, the theme of blessing and covenant on both Israel and the Lord's part. It is a chapter with a number of different declarations within it, in verses 3, 5, 13, 17 and 18, and it functions in part to ratify the Covenant. There are three great declarations.

In verses 1 to 11, declaration of what God has done for Israel in the presentation of the firstfruits. Verses 12 to 15, declaration of Israel's obedience in the context of the tithe of the third year. And verses 16 to 19, reciprocal declarations of covenant commitment.

Verses 1 to 4 prescribe the offering of firstfruits. Firstfruits are a sign of entering into the possession of the land and of the Lord's blessing within it. As part of the ritual, the offerer of the firstfruits formally declared the Lord's fulfilment of his promise.

In verses 5 to 11, there's a confession and celebration of the Lord's acts for Israel. Following the handing of the firstfruits to the priest, the worshipper makes a formal declaration of the Lord's great acts of deliverance. From Jacob, the wandering Aramean, to the Exodus, to their entry into the land.

The offering of the firstfruits is situated within the context of this story, as a demonstration of the Lord's fulfilment of his word, a promise. The declaration is powerfully personalised. The offerer places himself within the story, within the history himself.

Jacob is my father, the events of the Exodus happened to us. Once again, the importance of memory is being emphasised and underlined. It's been so prominent a theme at the beginning of the section of Deuteronomy that we're in, and it's foregrounded again here.

The worshipper situates himself in an ongoing history, reminding himself who he is, in the light of God's work with his people. Personally retelling the history is an obligation for each Israelite man. The offerer then rejoices before the Lord, understanding his own harvest as a participation in the redemptive history of the Lord's dealings with Israel.

He celebrates with his household, and then also with the Levite, with the sojourner and others, expressing thanksgiving coupled with generosity. Every third year, Israel had to lay up the tithe within its towns for the use of the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow. This is described earlier on in chapter 14 verses 28-29.

The blessing experienced by the Israelite, the blessing he declared in his offering of his first fruits in verses 1-11, had to be enjoyed by the poor and the marginal of the land too. Once again, Deuteronomy returns to the need to have a society in which it isn't everyone

for themselves, but in which every person gets to enjoy the fruits of the Lord's blessing, and everyone has a duty to ensure that the labour and the life of their brother isn't one marred by futility. The tithe wouldn't be offered before the Lord, but a declaration was made concerning it before the Lord, the Israelite declaring that he had done as the Lord required.

He had to remove the sacred portion from his house, as to hold on to it or to consume part of it would be a very serious transgression, taking what wasn't his. As a person keeping the covenant, he calls for God to bless Israel. And it is important to note here that covenant keeping is not presented as something that's impossible to do.

It's presented as something that's to be expected. The commandments of the covenant are fairly straightforward and provision is made for sin. Israel's failure isn't because the covenant requires absolute sinlessness, it doesn't, but because Israel rebels against the Lord, even when the Lord did everything to make it possible for them to live in fellowship with him.

The chapter ends on a fitting note in verses 16 to 19, with a pledge and ratification. It sums up the entire speech and returns to the themes that began the exposition of the commandments in chapter 6. Israel declared its commitment to obey all of the commandments of the Lord, with all of their heart and with all of their soul. The Lord declared Israel to be a people for his treasured possession, a people holy to him, set apart and above other nations.

Now this entire section falls under the tenth commandment as the conclusion of the entire teaching concerning the commandments. How do we overcome covetousness? We overcome covetousness by practicing contentment, by thanksgiving, with its elements of remembrance and celebration, by practicing generosity, and by sharing with those who have less. Something that we're seeing here that we see at various other points is that the law is not fulfilled primarily in do-nots, but in positive practices, and the positive practice of thanksgiving before the Lord, remembering what the Lord has done for you, sharing with the rest of the Lord's people, and knowing joy and contentment in all that he has granted you, is how you fulfill the commandment not to covet.

The law is fulfilled not by avoiding sin, but by pursuing righteousness. Also problems of the heart, problems to do with covetousness, can be helpfully addressed by healthy practices, by practices that commit us to remembering what God has done, committing us to celebration of his goodness to us, commit us to charity and sharing with those in need, and commit us to practices of contentment. Such practices are good ways to smoke out the sin, and to provide a context and a stimulus for the corresponding virtues to take root in people.

If you want to deal with your heart, give thought to your practices. A question to consider, why might it be appropriate that this section gives so much attention to the

context of a celebratory feast? Luke chapter 13 verses 10 to 35. Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues and behold there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for 18 years.

She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. When Jesus saw her he called her over and said to her, woman you are freed from your disability. And he laid his hands on her and immediately she was made straight and she glorified God.

But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, there are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day. Then the Lord answered him, you hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day? As he said these things all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

He said therefore, what is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches. And again he said, to what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened. He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem.

And someone said to him, Lord, will those who are saved be few? And he said to them, strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will seek to enter, and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, open to us, then he will answer you, I do not know where you come from. Then you will begin to say, we ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.

But he will say, I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves cast out.

And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last. At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.

And he said to them, go and tell that fox, behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should

perish away from Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often would I have gathered your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.

Behold, your house is forsaken, and I tell you, you will not see me until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Our section of Luke chapter 13 begins with a healing on the Sabbath. Jesus seems to make a point of healing upon the Sabbath.

He brings in the true Sabbath rest of the kingdom to Israel. Most typically people have to come to Jesus to be healed, often even persisting for some time. However, Jesus sees this woman, has compassion on her, calls her over and heals her.

Perhaps part of the point of this is intentionally and purposefully to heal on the Sabbath. Her situation doesn't seem to be urgent. She has been that way for 18 years, note the earlier reference to the number 18 in verse 4, and the synagogue leader is appalled by this.

He doesn't address Jesus but addresses the crowd, directly opposing Jesus' authority to them. The Sabbath healing here should probably be read alongside the Sabbath healing of chapter 14 verses 1 to 6. They have a lot in common. In that other account we read, 1 Sabbath when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully.

And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away.

And he said to them, Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out? And they could not reply to these things. In both of these cases there's a healing on the Sabbath. In both cases, Jesus uses an illustration of showing compassion to an ox or a donkey.

Why reference the ox or the donkey? Perhaps because the ox and the donkey are explicitly mentioned in the Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy chapter 5 verses 12 to 15. Jesus' teaching stresses that the Sabbath is not just about refraining from work, but about giving rest to those in your care. Healing on the Sabbath is most fitting.

And if the ox and the donkey are included in the Sabbath commandment, and you would untie your ox or donkey to give them water, why would you not untie or release a daughter of Abraham who's been held captive by Satan for 18 years? If you would give relief to your animals any day of the week, but are especially bound to do so on the Sabbath, how much more is it the case for the woman that Jesus healed? Jesus gives now two twin parables. The parable of the mustard seed is one in which Jesus is working with Old Testament background, most specifically the parable of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 17.

In verses 22 to 24 we see part of that that can parallel with this.

Thus says the Lord God, I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs, a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar, and under it will dwell every kind of bird.

In the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest, and all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord, I have spoken, and I will do it.

What Jesus says about the mustard seed defies all botanical reality, and this is because it is not an illustration taken from nature, rather it's playing off against the image of the cedar. We are to recognise that what is happening with the mustard seed is not natural. The jarring contrast between reality and the parable is part of the point.

The image of the tree in which birds take refuge is found elsewhere in scripture, and is used of great kingdoms, empires, and their rulers. Daniel chapter 4 verses 10 to 12. The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these.

I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful, and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all.

The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. Against all appearances it is going to be the mustard seed of Israel, the small nation that outgrows the great trees of the nations. There is a similar image of surprising growth in Daniel chapter 2 verse 35.

Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors, and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. God sowed the mustard seed in his field, and it will become the greatest tree of all.

The parable of the leaven that follows, leaven hidden in three measures of flour, is one that corresponds to this in certain respects. Israel is hidden among the nations, causing the nations gradually to rise up. Perhaps we could connect the three measures of flour with the three sons of Noah, I don't know.

It's not a dramatic, but it's a gradual process, and it's not glorious. Indeed it uses something that might be seen as negative or unclean. Leaven often has negative

symbolism attached to it.

The mustard seed and the leaven are twin parables. They can more readily be understood when related to each other. They're not identical twins.

They represent different aspects of Israel's ministry in relationship to the nations, small in both cases, but making an outsized effect, and hiddenness is an important theme. They have insignificant and inglorious origins, but a great purpose and destiny. One of the parables involves a man sowing seed, and its twin involves a woman hiding leaven.

There's a sort of marriage here. Both involve an intentional action towards a goal with significant results, but imperceptible processes. As Jesus gradually works his way towards Jerusalem, someone asks him the question whether those who are saved will be few.

Jesus responds with the illustration of a narrow door. This is similar to Matthew chapter 7 verses 13 to 14. Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. However, there isn't the same contrastive framing of the point here. It's not the contrast between the wide gate and the narrow gate, and as we'll see, Jesus has a more subtle point to make here in his response to the question.

The door will only be open for a limited period of time, and many who will want to enter will not be able to do so. The verse that Jesus quotes about those being told to go away comes from Psalm 6 verse 8, depart from me all you workers of evil. Jesus' implication that only few will find the door need not be read as a timeless statement that in each and every age only a few people will be saved.

It's given into a specific context, and although it does have more general application, we really must remember the context into which it is first spoken. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are going to be in the kingdom at the messianic feast with Gentiles, while numerous sons of the kingdom find themselves outside. This imagery of an eschatological feast comes from the Old Testament itself.

In Isaiah chapter 25 verses 6 to 9, on this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well-refined, and he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth. For the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day, Behold, this is our God. We have waited for him that he might save us. This is the Lord.

We have waited for him. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. Many are coming from the east and the west, the north and the south.

There is going to be a great turning of tables. And this all presents an answer to the question that might have surprised the questioner. The questioner was most likely thinking of the size of the remnant of Israel.

But Jesus' answer, while half suggesting that the remnant of Israel might indeed be few, speaks of many people coming from the four corners of the world to join Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the prophets in the eschatological banquet. The numbers at the feast won't be small, but the identity of the honoured guests might be surprising. Jesus is moving towards Jerusalem.

However, he still seems to be in the territory of Herod Antipas. There are three contrasting desires within this section. Herod's desire to kill Jesus, Jesus' desire to gather Jerusalem together, and Jerusalem's desire to resist this.

Jesus is warned by some Pharisees, and again we should remember that the Pharisees are not always bad guys in the Gospels and Acts. They fear he is going to get caught in a trap and want him to travel away from the region so that he will not be destroyed by Herod. Herod is a genuine threat.

He has already killed John the Baptist and he's speculated that Jesus might be John the Baptist raised from the dead. He's described like a fox by Jesus. He's a pest, he's a minor player.

In Judges 15 verses 4 following, Samson seems to associate the Philistines with foxes. Jesus is indeed going to leave Herod's region of Galilee, but not to save his life, rather in order to die in Jerusalem, being killed in the chief city which stands for the entire nation. In verses 32 to 33, Jesus describes his work in a three-day pattern, corresponding to patterns of death and resurrection.

He will finish his course on the third day. Jesus is a new Jeremiah. He declares judgment upon the house and then laments over Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the site where the prophet's blood must be gathered, the house, the temple, and by extension the whole nation is to be left desolate. Jesus wants to gather Israel under his wings. This is a biblical image of God's protection and the provision of refuge for his people.

The fact that Jesus compares himself to a hen immediately after speaking of Herod as a fox may not be a coincidence. A question to consider. How might Jesus' Sabbath practice inform our understanding of the purpose of the law more generally?