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May 18th: Deuteronomy 19 & Luke 10:1-24

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Preventing the cycles of vengeance. Sending out the seventy-two.

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

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Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 19. When the Lord your God cuts off the nations whose land the Lord your God is giving you, and you dispossess them and dwell in their cities and in their houses, you shall set apart three cities for yourselves in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess. You shall measure the distances and divide into three parts the area of the land that the Lord your God gives you as a possession, so that any manslayer can flee to them.

This is the provision for the manslayer, who by fleeing there may save his life. If anyone kills his neighbor unintentionally without having hated him in the past, as when someone goes into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down a tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies, he may flee to one of these cities and live. Lest the avenger of blood and hot anger pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and strike him fatally,

though the man did not deserve to die, since he had not hated his neighbor in the past.

Therefore I command you, you shall set apart three cities. And if the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as He has sworn to your fathers, and gives you all the land that He promised to give to your fathers, provided you are careful to keep all this commandment, which I command you today, by loving the Lord your God and by walking ever in His ways, then you shall add three other cities to these three, lest innocent blood be shed in your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, and so the guilt of bloodshed be upon you. But if anyone hates his neighbor, and lies in wait for him, and attacks him, and strikes him fatally so that he dies, and he flees into one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there, and hand him over to the avenger of blood, so that he may die.

Your eyes shall not pity him, but you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, so that it may be well with you. You shall not move your neighbor's landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess. A single witness shall not suffice against any person for any crime, or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed.

Only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be established. If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness, and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother.

So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eyes shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

In Deuteronomy chapter 6 to 26 we work through the Ten Commandments commandment by commandment, and in chapter 19 we reach the second half of the Ten Commandments, concerned with our duties to our neighbour, and the sixth commandment, you shall not murder, is the one that begins. Apart from that devoted to the first commandment, this is the longest such unit in the book of Deuteronomy. It runs up to chapter 22 verse 8. And chapter 19 falls into three sections.

First there's the law concerning the cities of refuge, then there's law concerning landmarks, and then there's laws concerning witnesses. One of the chief concerns of the material in this section is to establish institutional structures that protect the innocent, especially those who might otherwise be institutionally vulnerable, such as those who had committed accidental homicide and the wrongfully accused. The first half of this chapter concerns providing means of sanctuary.

That had already existed in some form, but now it needed to be set up for a new form in their entrance into the land. In Exodus chapter 21 verses 12 to 14 we see that the altar was a place of sanctuary previously. Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death.

But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die. The land has to be divided into three parts, and three cities have to be chosen at an accessible distance from any point in the land.

This law was already given in Numbers chapter 35 verses 10 to 34. You shall give three cities beyond the Jordan, and three cities in the land of Canaan, to be cities of refuge. These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there.

And there has to be distinction made between different types of murder. So the passage goes on to distinguish between murder with various instruments, and then how to distinguish between these. But if he pushed him suddenly without enmity, or hurled anything on him without lying in wait, or used a stone that could cause death, and without seeing him dropped it on him, so that he died, though he was not his enemy and did not seek his harm, then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood in accordance with these rules, and the congregation shall rescue the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he had fled, and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil.

But if the manslayer shall at any time go beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge to which he fled, and the avenger of blood finds him outside the boundaries of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood, for he must remain in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest. But after the death of the high priest, the manslayer may return to the land of his possession, and these things shall be for a statute and rule for you throughout your generations, in all your dwelling places. Numbers 35 then goes on to discuss laws of witness in capital cases, and the fact that ransom could not be taken for the life of a murderer.

Behind all of this there is the concern that is expressed in the final verses of this section. You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.

Within the law of the manslayer is the need to distinguish between malicious and

premeditated homicide, and negligent or accidental homicide. The example of a man accidentally killing his neighbour, with whom he had no prior quarrel with the head of an axe that accidentally came off, is the example that Deuteronomy chapter 19 gives. Now this man may have been negligent in not looking after his tools, but this is not assumed, it's not necessarily the case.

The avenger of blood would presumably have been a close relative or kinsman of the person who lost their life, not just a bounty hunter. In a society where you do not have an established police force, some allowance is made for vengeance in this way. There is a limited power of policing, but yet it is necessary that some people face the consequences of their action.

The concern though is that this should be dealt with in a just manner, and that people should be protected from the cycles of vengeance and vendettas. Much of this chapter, when considered carefully, seems to be designed to work with a society where vengeance is a very powerful and dangerous and volatile force, trying to put curbs upon it, trying to ensure that it does not get started, trying to ensure that the law takes priority, and that breaks are placed upon vengeance's characteristic lack of proportion. The purpose of the city of refuge, among other things, is to ensure that people get just trials, preventing vengeance from taking its effect before people can actually be heard and have their case considered by the judges.

Cities of refuge had already been set up in Deuteronomy chapter 4, in verses 41-43 of that chapter. Then Moses set apart three cities in the east beyond the Jordan, that the manslayer might flee there. Anyone who kills his neighbour unintentionally, without being at enmity with him in time past, he may flee to one of these cities and save his life.

Beza in the wilderness on the table land for the Reubenites, Ramarth in Gilead for the Gadites, and Golan in Bashan for the Manassites. The extra three cities that Moses speaks about here are set up in Joshua chapter 20, in verse 7 of that chapter. So they appointed Kiddesh in Galilee, in the hill country of Naphtali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-Aba, the Hezhebron, in the hill country of Judah.

In this chapter, however, Moses goes on to speak of three further cities that they should set apart if and when their territory was enlarged. There is no reference to this ever taking place though. Deuteronomy chapter 11, verses 22-24 does speak about the territory that they will get if they are faithful to the Lord.

Now that never actually happened. They didn't get all that territory. It didn't extend up as far as the Euphrates.

As a judgment upon Israel, they never entered into the full measure of what the Lord held out to them in his promise. Judges chapter 2, verses 20-3, verse 4 describes this.

Now these are the nations that the Lord left to test Israel by them.

That is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before. These are the nations, the five lords of the Philistines, and all the Canaanites, and the Sidonians, and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-Herman as far as Lebo-Haimat.

They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. The purpose of the extra cities of refuge is to make adequate provision for the protection of the innocent from vengeance. It is important to recognize the logic of this.

A failure to provide such sufficiently accessible institutional structures for the protection of the innocent means that Israel would be guilty of the blood of the innocent. This suggests, then, that injustice can be, among other things, a matter of institutional omission, the failure to provide institutions to protect the innocent. The asylum that is offered here is a limited right.

It was only for accidental or negligent homicide. People could be extradited or removed from the horns of the altar and put to death if they proved to be guilty of actual premeditated or intentional murder. This section is followed by another odd commandment about removing landmarks or boundary stones.

Once again, it's important to consider why it's here. And it might seem strange. Why don't we have this under the 8th commandment, not to steal? Or the 9th commandment, not to bear false witness, you're telling a lie about the way in which the land is divided.

Or the 10th commandment, not coveting your neighbour's field and property. It might seem that it would fit more neatly under any one of those single commandments. So why on earth place it alongside the material concerned with the commandment, you shall not murder? First of all, we should notice that placing it here doesn't mean that it would not have been appropriate elsewhere.

Nor does it necessarily mean that it most naturally belongs under the 6th commandment in the broader scheme of things. Rather, I believe it is here to invite reflection. And why is that? It seems to me that this is a law designed to prevent homicide, more particularly vendettas and cycles of vengeance from building up.

The desire for another man's land so often leads to murder or to escalating cycles of vengeance, as in the case of Ahab and Naboth's Vineyard, for instance. Directly attacking such boundaries is a predatory act. It's more than merely a matter of trespassing over them.

We might think about the difference between wrongs that occur within the borders of a

territory, that are criminal offences to be dealt with by the law of that territory, and wrongs that threaten the very borders themselves, which are enemy attacks generally dealt with by a violent assertion of sovereignty. Of course, the boundaries of an Israelite family were within the general territory of the land and fell under its law. However, honouring and protecting the internal boundaries, not merely the external borders, is absolutely essential to protecting the peace and the integrity of the land.

There are few things more likely to result in unnecessary bloodshed than the failure to honour the internal boundaries and the external borders of the land. The chapter concludes with laws about witnesses. These are in close connection with the laws concerning cities of refuge, as we see in Numbers 35.30. We might again wonder why it is placed here.

Why not place this section under the 9th commandment, concerned with prohibiting bearing false witness? Once again, I believe we are being encouraged to consider a facet of the law that we might not otherwise consider. The concern of this chapter is upon avoiding and avenging the shedding of innocent blood, and false witness can be a means by which people seek the life of their neighbour. The judges must carefully investigate all cases.

They must ensure that appropriate standards of evidence and testimony are met. Accusations that are proven false and proven to be malicious render the false accuser liable to the same judgement that he sought to bring upon another. For false testimony in a capital case, then, the false accuser could face the death penalty himself.

Once again, judges are warned against inappropriate pity. The justice they are supposed to mete out is not that of vengeful passion, or familial vendetta, as the avenger of blood. But nor is it a matter of pity.

They must be impartial and give people what is due to them. Equitable, retributive justice is absolutely non-negotiable. Punishment must be proportionate to the crime.

Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. When we hear such a list, we think that it is a cycle of vengeance. But it is precisely designed to prevent the cycle of vengeance.

This is a task committed to public justice, not private vengeance. And more importantly still, it is calculated to prevent the disproportionality that is characteristic of vengeance. Vengeance in an honour society is disproportionate.

If you kill a member of my family, I will kill three members of yours. In laws targeted against the reality of vengeance, then, Israel is being presented with a way in which the Sixth Commandment can be honoured within its public life. A question to consider.

How might the story of Cain and his descendant Lamech in Genesis chapter 4 provide

some helpful background for considering the laws of this chapter? Luke chapter 10 verses 1 to 24 After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. And he said to them, The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.

Go your way. Behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no money-bag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.

Whatever house you enter, first say, Peace be to this house, and if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the labourer deserves his wages.

Do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick in it, and say to them, The kingdom of God has come near to you.

But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near. I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Besseder! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades.

The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me. The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name. And he said to them, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to little children.

Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Then turning to the disciples he said privately, Blessed are the eyes that see what you see, for I tell you that

many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

In Luke chapter 10 Jesus sends out the 72, much as the 12 were sent out at the beginning of chapter 9. Here, however, they function as a sort of an advance party. They go before him into all of the towns that he is going to visit on his way towards Jerusalem. Jesus is very slowly advancing towards Jerusalem, and like an army gradually moving down through the land, he sends disciples in twos ahead of him.

In some texts the number of disciples is 70. In other texts, such as the ESV which we are using, there are 72. What are we to make of the numbers? First of all, if it is 70, we can think of the 70 nations of the world in Genesis chapter 10, representing all of humanity.

70 people go down with Jacob into Egypt in Genesis chapter 46, verses 26 to 27. Jesus, the new Jacob, has 12 disciples as Jacob had 12 sons, and 70 more in the wider body of his family. There were 70 elders of Israel who received Moses' spirit in Numbers chapter 11.

It could also relate to the number of people in the Great Sanhedrin. The choosing and empowering of the 70 represents Christ's formation of a new Israel and a new polity. But then there seem to be two more, which presents some problems for those connections, if it is indeed correct.

So what to make of this? First, you might argue that some of the connections with 70 would still pertain, but much more loosely. Yet it is curious to notice that on a couple of occasions where there is this connection with the number 70, you also have the number 72 connected in some traditions. So first of all, there are two extra people in Numbers 11.

There are the 70 elders, but there are these two, Eldad and Medad, who are in the camp, who are separate from them. A number of people using slightly different criteria have counted the number of the nations in Genesis chapter 10 slightly differently, making 72 by some reckonings. Also, 70 nations plus Edom and Israel make 72.

By some traditions, 70 scholars produced the Septuagint. By other traditions, it was 72. So a curious uncertainty about whether a number is 70 or 72 is common to a number of important instances.

Perhaps there is something more to be explored here. Of course, 72 is 6 times 12. They could be seen as an expansion of the 12, but they could also be seen as, with the 12, forming a group of 84.

Now, Luke has already used the number 84 in reference to the age of Anna, and 84 is 7 times 12. There is a sort of fullness represented here. Note also that the number of disciples prior to the day of Pentecost is 120, again an expansion upon the number 12.

The reference here to the harvest might look back to the seed sowing mentioned a few chapters earlier. Maybe we should see the 12 sent out earlier, in chapter 9 verses 1 to 6, as sowers, and the 70 functioning more as reapers. There is a much greater emphasis upon judgment associated with the ministry of the 70, which might relate to this.

They gather the wheat, but bring down judgment upon the chaff. They are sent out in a very similar way to the 12. They are sent out with instructions that suggest both the urgency of their mission, and also their dependence upon the people that they are being sent to, to provide for them.

The sending of the 12 and the 70 might also recall the spying out of the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua. There are hints there that they are sent out in pairs too. 12 spies were sent to spy out the Promised Land, representing the whole of Israel.

Now the sending out of the 12, followed by 72, suggests another representation of Israel as they spy out the land. But these spies bring back a good report. A connection is drawn between the reception of the 70 disciples and the final judgment.

We can maybe think about Matthew chapter 25 verses 31 to 46, and the sheep and the goats. The division there occurs on the basis of their reception of the brothers of Christ. The brothers are the disciples, the emissaries that are sent out representing their Lord.

It isn't merely about a general attitude towards people in need. This isn't what that passage is about. The passage is rather about the reception of the prophet.

However, the disciples are sent without great provisions. They depend upon the hospitality of the places to which they go. And the test that is being provided to these places is a test of hospitality.

The way that these places will or will not receive the prophet is very similar to the way that they will or will not receive the poor. Such inspections of cities remind us perhaps of the story of Sodom in chapter 19 of Genesis. Also of the story of the two spies going to Jericho in the story of Rahab in the book of Joshua.

The way that the towns received Jesus' 72 brethren would weigh in their final fate. Think about the way Sodom is described in Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 48-50. As I live, declares the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done.

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom. She and her daughters had pride, excessive food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did an abomination before me, so I removed them when I saw it.

In the story of Sodom there is a great juxtaposition between chapters 18 and 19. The hospitality of Abraham to the angels and the Lord unawares in chapter 18. And the way

that that is juxtaposed with the story of Lot's hospitality to the angels and the inhospitality of the people of Sodom.

A failure to receive the messengers of the Lord is connected with a failure to receive the poor and the needy more generally. So it should come as no surprise to us that the 72 are sent as people who are dependent upon the hospitality of the cities and the towns that they are visiting. Jesus challenges the cities that he has performed most of his works in to that point.

On account of God's great work within their midst and their rejection of it, they are preparing themselves for a far greater judgement. Capernaum, for instance, sought to be lifted up to heaven, but it will be brought down to Sheol. Jesus' statement here is playing off the background of Isaiah chapter 14 verses 12 to 15.

Once again in verses 17 to 20, the theme of heavenly conflict comes to the foreground. The disciples are engaged in a battle with demonic forces which are being driven back by their work. Jesus' vision probably refers to something that has not yet occurred.

It's an anticipation of what will occur through his death, resurrection, ascension and the ministry of the church following Pentecost. We might consider Revelation chapter 12 in light of this. The greater defeat of Satan would result from events that are being put in motion with the spying out of the land here.

The emphasis upon conflict with Satan and his demons makes clear that Israel is his occupied territory. The primary enemy is not Rome. It's Satan.

This all sets things up for Jesus' prayer to his father. Verse 21 is a profoundly Trinitarian verse. The son rejoices in the Holy Spirit and addresses the father.

The father as the Lord of heaven and earth is the one who reveals and hides. He hides truth from the proud who imagine themselves to be wise and he reveals things to the weakest and the humblest. All authority has already been given to Christ.

He is the one who passes on all that the father has given him and apart from him there is no access to it. A question to consider. The eschatological and spiritual horizons of reality are very prominent in this passage.

Behind the ministry of the 72 Jesus shows the horizon of this great battle with Satan himself and shows the horizon of the last day looming over these cities. How might we better recognise the interrelation between the horizons that are most immediate to us and the horizons of the age to come and the horizon of conflict with spiritual forces?