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May 5th: Deuteronomy 6 & Luke 4:31-44

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Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.
Jesus in Capernaum.

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

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Transcript

Deuteronomy 6. I hope you find this helpful, edifying, and encouraging. Thank you for joining us today. I hope you find this helpful, edifying, and encouraging.

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We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household before our eyes.

And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God for our good always, that he might preserve us alive as we are this day.

And it will be righteousness for us if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God as he has commanded us.

Deuteronomy chapter 5 recounts the Ten Commandments. But from chapter 6 to 26 the Ten Commandments are expounded. Part of the purpose of this is to develop literacy in the law.

Literacy can be thought of as condensing and expounding. To condense is to put things in a nutshell, to express the deeper principle of something in a single statement for instance. And to expound is to be able to unpack that single statement or the basic principles and to show how they play out in practice, to refract the white light of the law into all these different applications.

Chapters 6 to 11 unpack the First Commandment, what it means to have no other gods besides the Lord. The focus is upon the importance of a loyalty to the Lord. And the First Commandment sums up the meaning of the Covenant.

Israel's exclusive loyalty to the Lord is the fundamental principle of the Covenant, that which lies beneath everything else. Their observance of the commandments and statutes that the Lord has given them is their way in which they will express the loyalty that they have to the Lord their God. If we want to understand why the First Commandment is given so much attention within the book of Deuteronomy, it is because of this.

Unless the First Commandment is grasped and observed, everything else is in vain. Everything builds upon the foundation of this First Commandment. And as they observe this commandment, they will find that things go well for them.

They will be brought into the land that flows with milk and honey, these symbols of fruitfulness, and they will experience God's blessing upon them. At the heart of this chapter is the Shema, which is that great statement beginning, Hear O Israel. This statement is at the very heart of Israel's life, having a sort of creedal significance.

There are various ways in which this statement has been interpreted and translated. Some see it as, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. That's a statement of the exclusivity of God as the Lord of His people.

There are no other gods that they will have besides Him. While this is arguably not the most natural way to translate it, it's in this way that Zechariah 14, verse 9 expresses the principle. And the Lord will be king over all the earth.

On that day the Lord will be one and His name one. The point being that there are no other gods besides the Lord. Another way to take it is that the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

That being a statement about God's nature, that God is unique, there is no other being like the Lord. Or that God is simple, that there is no division in God, there is no separation, there is no distinction between action and potential in God, or between genus and species. It could also be interpreted as, The Lord our God is one Lord.

The claim there would be that the Lord is not many, a Lord of this location and a Lord of that location, but the Lord of all the earth, the Lord of all things. My inclination is to go with the first interpretation, that it's a statement of the Lord's exclusive claim upon the loyalties of His people. Yet to see in this statement of loyalty also an implicit statement of theology and the being of God does not seem inappropriate to me, although that move needs to be made carefully.

Moses charges people to love the Lord their God with all their heart and soul and might. Love is the fulfilment of the law. The law is not a matter of observing a set of commandments just in external action.

It's not just a matter of legalistic, dotting I's and crossing T's. It's about something that arises from the heart. It's not just about feeling as we would understand it though.

When we hear the word love we tend to think in terms of emotions, but this is more than emotions. It's a total commitment expressed in actions. One's heart is one's seat of thought, of will and of feeling.

One's soul is one's emotions, passions and desires. And Moses stresses that it's to be all of these things. It's not to be half-hearted or divided.

There's no wavering to and fro. There's no compartmentalisation of loyalties. This is something that requires the entirety of your being.

And to do so with all your might is to throw your entire weight into it. You're doing this without reserve. This statement, as Jesus expresses it, is the greatest commandment of the law.

It's the statement in which the whole of the law is summed up. It's a summation of the first commandment, to have no other gods besides the Lord, but it unpacks what that actually means and the sort of loyalty that is required of the people of God. Not just an external loyalty, but a complete devotion of themselves.

And this great commandment also expresses how important the heart is in all of this. The heart has to be ordered towards the Lord, not just the external practice. And from this fundamental statement of the first commandment and the love and the loyalty that is required of God's people, Moses moves to the words that he's about to teach them, that those words must be in their heart.

This is the shape that loyalty and love towards the Lord takes, taking his words into us

and making them part of us. The taking of words into the heart might imply, among other things, memory, that we memorise scripture, that we chew it over, that it is something that is within us. I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

The memorisation of scripture really does seem to be part of what's in view here. Having the words of God in your heart is also having those words as matters of delight. Words in your heart are things that you rejoice in, that you take pleasure in, that you return to again and again and again.

It's also a matter of meditation, meditation in that you chew over these words, you ruminate upon them. And the Psalms seem to be part of the fulfilment of this, not just in the way that you memorise the Psalms, but also in the way that the Psalms conscript the emotions and the desires, so that when you sing the Psalms, your desires are made part of your expression of the word of God. This is part of what is meant, I believe, in having the word of God in our heart.

This also anticipates the new covenant. In Jeremiah 31, verses 31-34, God declares, Writing the law in the heart is a matter of knowing the Lord within. It's not just an external word, it's a word that has become part of us.

It's also a sign of divine ownership. As God writes his word in the hearts of his people, his people are marked out as his people. We can see something of this movement in Scripture itself, as law starts off being an external commandment, and then as we go through Scripture, it's increasingly taken within.

I've already mentioned the Psalms, which are an internalisation of the word of God in the expression of delight and song, the stirring up and conscription of the emotions, and in memorisation. It's also in the work of wisdom, as the law is taken in so that the person can perceive in terms of the law of God. And then it goes further in the work of the prophets.

The prophets are those who actually eat the word, as in the case of Ezekiel, for instance. And as he eats the word, that word is taken into himself in an even deeper way, so he is an embodied expression of God's message to his people. 2 Corinthians 3 speaks of the Corinthians as epistles of Christ, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of heart.

Moses goes on to emphasise that the law is to be taught to children as a pattern of life. This is something that you don't just keep for yourself, it's not just something that you meditate upon in your own heart, it's something you speak about to your offspring and to your family. It should be constantly a matter of your conversation.

You're always chewing this over, ruminating upon it, muttering it as you're walking

around, as you're sitting down, as you're lying down, and then as you're getting up. The words of the law should be bound to your body. From at least the 2nd century BC, Israel took this literally, binding leather containers containing passages from the Torah to their foreheads and also to their hands.

Like the tassels on the Israelite garments, these phylacteries serve to memorialise the law of God, to provide a constant objective spur to memory and to reflection. Writing them on the forehead and on the hand is associated with action and with thought. This is something that you're supposed to meditate upon, it's something that's supposed to guide the action of your hand.

It is also to be written upon the doorposts of houses and on gates, those places of entry, those liminal realms that mark out the difference between what's inside and what's outside. What's inside is distinguished by the fact that it comes under this sign, under the sign of the law. The law is the banner, as it were, that is upon Israel's houses, upon their cities, marking out their loyalties and expressing their core commitments.

We have a very narrow conception of words. We can think of words merely as conveying information. But words written upon things express ownership, they express a connection between the thing and the words that are written upon them.

Within this passage, there is a rich and deep emphasis upon a multifaceted relationship with the Word of God. The Word of God is not just some information that God gives to us, it's something that is expressed in material form. We write it upon things so that our houses come under its sign, so that its ownership of our bodies is expressed.

We seek to write it upon our hearts through memorization, through singing, and through these various other means by which it becomes part of us, and not just an external set of words upon pages. In Deuteronomy 17, verses 18-20, the king is instructed to write a book of the law for himself, and to meditate upon it throughout his life. We might consider doing the same sort of thing, to express the bond that exists between us and the law of God that he has given to us, and by which we are to be formed.

The importance of teaching children is foregrounded in both verses 4-9 and in verses 20-21. The sections in between focus upon not forgetting the Lord, or the lessons of the Exodus in the wilderness. The Lord is a jealous God, and those who reject or forget him will suffer severe consequences.

There is a real danger of forgetting the Lord in the prosperity of the land that he will give to the people. They have the seductive pull of false gods as well to experience. They are told that they should not test the Lord, as they did at Massa.

This is a reference back to Exodus 17, verse 7, and he called the name of the place Massa and Meribah, because of the quarrelling of the people of Israel, and because they

tested the Lord, saying, Is the Lord among us or not? Later on in Psalm 95, verses 7-9, this event is recalled. There was an implicit threat of disobedience within the statement of the people at Massa. Is the Lord among us or not? Is he going to act on our behalf? If he doesn't, well, we might just reject him.

Even though they had seen all of the things that God had done for them in the wilderness, and then before that, in the events of the Exodus itself. They must teach all of these things to their children. They need to know the rationale for obedience.

They're not just being told, you must obey. They're being told why they must obey. And as they understand that, they'll grow in wisdom and a deepening acquaintance with the law.

The law will not just be something that's laid upon them from outside, it'll be something that they can take into themselves. Parents, to do this, are to retell the story of the Exodus, their former state in slavery, the deliverance that God accomplished for them, God's judgments upon Egypt, his good purpose for them in bringing them into the land, his gift of the law at Sinai, and his requirement of obedience for their good. Moses ends with the statement that such obedience will be righteousness for us.

As people express their loyalty to God in observing the commandments, it will be to their credit. They will be in right standing with the Lord. It is imperative that we see what is at the heart of the faith of Israel.

What is at the heart of Israel's faith is not a set of legalistic requirements. It's the calling to love God, to be loyal to him. It's a calling to faith.

This is ultimately what will be righteousness for the people of God. This loyalty, this steadfast commitment to the Lord their God, looking to God for provision, for care, trusting him and his character to look after them and to bless them, and expressing that in obedience and faithfulness in the things that they do, delighting in his word, taking that word into them, meditating upon that word, singing about that word, making that word their constant reflection, and teaching that word to their children after them. This is what it will look like to be the people of God.

A question to consider. Where can we find New Testament allusions to the Shema? Luke chapter 4 verses 31 to 44 And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf.

And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. And immediately she rose and began to serve them. Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.

And demons also came out of many, crying, You are the Son of God! But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ. And when it was day he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them.

But he said to them, I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well, for I was sent for this purpose. And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea. After Jesus has been rejected by his hometown of Nazareth in Luke 4, he goes to Capernaum, which would be the base for his earliest mission.

Accounts of this Sabbath are also found in Matthew and Mark, and the rest of this chapter recounts a series of great works that Jesus performed on this Sabbath morning, afternoon and evening. He begins by teaching in the synagogue in a way that is seen as remarkable for its authority. He isn't just delivering an opinion, or expressing some viewpoint, or even just teaching.

He himself is bringing the truth and the claim of God to bear upon people in a way that is remarkable. He demonstrates the authority of his word of teaching, but also demonstrates his powerful word of exorcism. He casts out the demon who testifies to his true identity as the Holy One of God.

Again, this probably has some priestly connotations. He has both authority and power, and that power is seen in the relationship to the evil spirits. Having faced the devil in the wilderness, he now faces demons in the synagogue.

The devil's forces are occupying the heart of Israel's places of worship, threatening to render them a desolate place. We don't see demons much in the Old Testament. They are largely associated with the wilderness and abandoned locations, in places like Isaiah 13, verse 21, or 34, verse 13-14, and then also we see this in Luke 11, verse 24.

Widespread demonic possession is not the norm, but Jesus performs exorcisms wherever he goes. Maybe we could relate this to the story of David and Saul. After David has been anointed by God's spirit, a distressing spirit troubles Saul, and David has to minister to him.

As Christ is anointed by the spirit, he plays a similar role for Israel. He causes the distressing spirits to depart from the people, and as a result of his work, his fame spreads throughout the region. But as we go through the Gospel, we see that the crowds don't really understand what his mission involves.

The synagogue exorcism is followed by the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, and it's interesting that we find a reference to Simon here without any previous introduction. Luke seems to presume that Simon will already be known to his readers, and at various other points in his Gospel, he is presuming some prior knowledge on the part of his

reader. Simon's wife is spoken of here, even if only to mention that she has a mother.

As Jesus seems to have stayed in this house, she was probably one of the women who helped support his ministry. Such women were mentioned in Luke 8, verses 1-3. Later on, in 1 Corinthians 9-5, we're told that she accompanied Peter as a fellow worker.

Jesus is someone who heals both in public and in private. It's likely that Jesus stayed in the house with Simon and Andrew and their extended family, and it's worth considering the sort of family structure of the society he's ministering within. It may help us better to understand the challenge that he presented at certain points.

We might have another window into the familial life of the context, in the story of Jesus being lost in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph go with Jesus, but Jesus can be lost for quite a long time. They presume he's with the others.

There is presumably a large extended family, and lots of friends and others travelling with them, and we should presume that Jesus would have spent a lot of time with this extended network of people, and also that many of his disciples seem to have been drawn from such an extended network. Having relations to Jesus and also to each other. Luke speaks of Simon's mother-in-law's fever as something like a form of possession.

It afflicts her. Jesus rebukes it, and it leaves her. And then she begins to serve him.

If Jesus, as it seems, made Peter's house in Capernaum a base of his operations, Simon's mother-in-law would probably have been his primary hostess, with all of the honour that that implied. Jesus does all these things on the Sabbath, and there doesn't seem to be any conflict about this fact at this point. Later on people come to him in the evening as the sun's going down and as the new day is beginning, and he heals many.

He forbids the demons to speak, because they know him. Jesus often discourages people from talking about healings and deliverances, and also silences demons. However, there are occasions when Jesus displays his work more openly.

The purpose of the secrecy seems to exceed merely a concern to avoid excessive attention from authorities. The disciples and the demons have a knowledge about Jesus' mission and identity, for which the time has not yet come for more public disclosure. Part of the purpose of the secrecy is that it avoids the great openness to misunderstanding that a revelation of his identity before its proper time would allow for, prior to his death and resurrection, a revelation of the fact that he is the Son of God, that he is the Messiah, would lead to him being made king or something like that, which would undermine the purpose of his mission, drawing him away from the path of the cross.

Only when the cross and the resurrection have occurred can it truly be understood what it means that Jesus is the Christ. This chapter ends with Jesus leaving Capernaum secretly to go to a desolate place and continue his mission elsewhere, when he ends up

going down to the synagogues of Judea and preaching there too. A question to consider, how might we get a clearer idea of what Jesus is doing in this passage and elsewhere from his statement in verses 18 to 19 of this chapter?