

Fourteenth Annual Franciscan Lecture
Hilfield
Wednesday 3rd June 2009

Opening Prayer:

O Friend of the forsaken and Lover of the unloved,
Make us bearers of your presence to all.
Teach us to walk in the poverty of your Son
And to be among your people as those who serve;
In the name of him who for our sakes became poor,
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

When I was asked to give this lecture a couple of months ago, Brother Samuel asked me to consider some of the issues raised by the financial and economic crisis, particularly their effect on the poor and marginalised.

Well, I live in South Kensington, SW7, one of the most expensive postcodes in London. This is not something I am comfortable with as a Franciscan Tertiary, but the accommodation comes free with my job, courtesy of the Diocese of London. I live in the top half of a vicarage with my husband, we have the usual kitchen, living-room, dining-room, three large bedrooms, a study each, two bathrooms and a third toilet. In material terms we are very wealthy. Yet in comparison to many in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea we are poor. Local churches (and the city to a certain extent) empty during the school holidays as many families leave their apartments to retire to their country cottages (or head overseas) for the vacation.

But that is not the complete picture because, if you look closely as you walk past the impressive houses, you will notice five, six, seven or even a dozen different doorbells for each front door. Many of the magnificent doorways hide multiple occupancy dwellings, with a rapid turnover of tenants. During the last year the number of apartments for sale, or to let, has noticeably increased. During the last eighteen months some of the nearby shops have closed and these commercial properties remain empty. During the last six months the number of people living in doorways and stairwells locally has multiplied.

Life is precarious in the city – there have been numerous high profile redundancies and reorganisations in the financial sector – and for those who continue to be employed, work is stressful beyond belief. But contrary to popular perceptions, most of those in the banking sector have not been earning vast salaries. Many of those who were made redundant are well educated and highly motivated and they have been able to find new employment. However the ramifications of the downturn in the economy are widespread, with those serving the city behind the scenes being badly hit – the shop workers, cleaners and caterers. Those who are less educated and less qualified have fewer options. As always it seems, it is the poorer people who suffer disproportionately.

The temptation is to blame the bankers but I was struck by something the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, wrote in *The Times* back in March. He wrote this, ‘The market economy has generated more wealth, eliminated more poverty and liberated more human creativity than any other economic system. The fault is not with the market but with the idea that the market alone is all we need.’¹ The market is good at creating wealth but not at distributing it fairly.

¹ http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article5946941.ece

The distribution of wealth is an important concern in the Pentateuch. I have been reminded of this repeatedly in recent weeks reading from the Book of Deuteronomy during Morning Prayer. As I began to pray about preparing this lecture, I kept on noticing how relevant this book is to the current economic situation and particularly the plight of the poorest members of our society. Deuteronomy 15:11 for instance reads in the New Revised Standard Version, ‘Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.”’

As Christopher Wright points out, the English translation misses an important emphasis in the Hebrew text here. The Hebrew literally says, ‘Open *your* hand to *your* brother, to *your* poor person, to *your* needy person in *your* land.’ Your poor person, your needy person, in your community, is your brother or your sister, so open your hand, your wallet, your home to help them. Deuteronomy places an emphasis on relating, not simply classifying. Poor and needy people belong to the community, they are brothers and sisters not simply social statistics. They are part of ‘your’ community, ‘my’ community, ‘our’ community, and they are not to be excluded, marginalized and victimized as an underclass.²

In fact if the community lived as it should, there would be no poor and needy people. Just a few verses earlier in Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 4-5 read:

There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the LORD your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today.

These verses point to the ultimate goal of a perfect coming together of divine blessing and human obedience, a wonderful situation in which every member of the community will have sufficient for their needs. It is interesting to note that Luke uses these verses, from the Septuagint translation, to describe the Christian community after the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: ‘There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.’ (Acts 4:34)

Deuteronomy has been called the heartbeat of the Old Testament. As one commentator writes, ‘Feel the pulse of Deuteronomy and you are in touch with the life and rhythm of the whole Hebrew Bible.’³ Sadly Christians often dismiss this Mosaic law as legalistic, certain that we are justified by grace alone. But this is to misunderstand the concept of Torah. Torah is teaching, or instruction, for living in a covenantal relationship with the LORD our God.

As Walter Brueggemann notes, ‘The mantra of this community is endlessly love God, then love neighbour, neighbour, neighbour.’⁴ The relationship between a person and God cannot be divorced from that person’s relationships with other people. Thus the preaching of Deuteronomy counters the perennial temptations of the market to pursue gain at someone else’s expense, to take advantage of ignorance, and to treat employees with indifference.⁵

² Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, NIBC (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 191-192.

³ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 1.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, ‘An Imaginative “Or”’ in *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 70.

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002), 89.

The Book of Deuteronomy is dynamic. It does not treat the teaching of Moses as set in tablets of stone but as a living tradition, one which is reiterated with imaginative freedom to keep it pertinent and responsive to different historical contexts.

The book is set in the thirteenth century. It presents itself as a record of some speeches of Moses, in the context of a renewal of the covenant, on the plains of Moab, before the people of Israel crossed the Jordan and settled in the land of Canaan. In this context Moses exhorts God's people to live differently from the Canaanites, for Moses knows that Israel, in the new land of promise, will have its faith in the LORD severely challenged by seductive alternatives of culture and religion.⁶

As you may know, the majority of critical scholarship treats the Book of Deuteronomy as an eighth or seventh-century document, situated during the period of Assyrian domination. This is also the period of the great pre-exilic prophets such as Amos and Hosea, Micah and Isaiah. In that context, the encouragement of the tradition of Deuteronomy is that the Israelites, especially under Josiah, should not give in to Assyrian definitions of reality.⁷ The covenant with the LORD is offered as a radical alternative to alliance with Assyria.

But the current debate in critical scholarship of Deuteronomy suggests that it is peculiarly suited to the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah in the fifth century. Nehemiah's action in Nehemiah chapter 5 has the fingerprints of Deuteronomy all over it. In that narrative the rich Jews are taxing poor Jews into slavery (Nehemiah 5:4-6). Nehemiah responds with anger at such exploitative economic transactions (Nehemiah 5:6-7) and he proposes restorative action (Nehemiah 5:10-12). Covenantal solidarity is far more important than the raw power of economic transaction. Nehemiah's actions clearly resonate with the teaching of Moses in Deuteronomy.⁸

Thus the teaching of Deuteronomy pertains to the thirteenth century, the seventh century, the fifth century... or to *any* century.

Brueggemann asserts, 'The Book of Deuteronomy is quite self-conscious in seeing that the issue of acquisitiveness practiced in amnesia versus neighbourliness practiced in vigorous memory is everywhere a recurring issue.'⁹ The same old dilemma keeps on rearing its ugly head throughout the centuries. People are continually driven to accumulate wealth, thinking that they are doing so in their own strength, by their own ingenuity. People forget that all that they have is a gift from God, their creator and their saviour. This is what Brueggemann calls acquisitiveness practiced in amnesia.

This whole scenario is in contrast to the call of the creator and saviour God to his people to remember their story, to recall the nature of their God and to live in imitation of him, that is to practice loving-kindness, mercy and justice. This is what Brueggemann calls neighbourliness practiced in vigorous memory.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 18.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, 'Just Like You... Forgiven!', in *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church* (Louisville: WJK, 2007), 168.

⁸ Brueggemann, 'Just Like You', *Mandate to Difference*, 169.

⁹ Brueggemann, 'Just Like You', 169.

So let me repeat that... Brueggemann asserts, 'The Book of Deuteronomy is quite self-conscious in seeing that the issue of acquisitiveness practiced in amnesia versus neighbourliness practiced in vigorous memory is everywhere a recurring issue.'

If we turn to the biblical text we see that:

In Deuteronomy chapter 6, Moses warns that the advanced, affluent standard of living in Canaanite culture would produce amnesia in Israel about the past, and indifference to the God of the exodus:

When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, *take care that you do not forget the LORD*, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the LORD your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth. (Deuteronomy 6:10-15)

So, when all is going well for you, when you live in a large house and drive a flash car, when you wear designer clothes and eat at gourmet restaurants, take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, your saviour, who has graciously provided all this for you.

In Deuteronomy chapter 7, Moses reminds Israel that its peculiar identity is a gift from the LORD, and the maintenance of that identity is essential:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

You have been chosen by God to be his holy people, his treasured possession. God's choice was not because of anything special about you. It was because God loved you that he chose you. It was because he kept his word. Remember this and live as God's holy people.

In chapter 8, Moses returns to the danger of amnesia due to affluence:

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...

Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. (Deuteronomy 8:11-14, 17-18)

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God by ignoring his covenant. When all goes well for you, when you earn a large salary, when your property increases in value, when your savings multiply, then do not claim that it is all due to your own efforts. ‘It’s all mine. It’s mine to enjoy. My abilities, my strength, my hard work, my cleverness, my professional skills, produced it, so it is mine.’ No! Remember the LORD your God, for the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it. He has graciously given it to the human race for our use.

If you forget that life is a gift from the generous Creator, and a miracle accomplished by a powerful redeemer, if you imagine that you are autonomous and without accountability, then you will become like everyone else, and like them, you will perish, warns Moses (in Deuteronomy 8:19-20.)

Finally, in chapter 10 Moses reflects on the God who is full of grace and truth. We have beheld his glory:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome. (Deuteronomy 10:17a)

This God is a gracious God:

who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. (Deuteronomy 10:17b-18)

So, remember your story, your history and be compassionate:

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:19)

Deuteronomy looks back to the roots of the faith in order to bring understanding and foster faithful living in the current crisis. This is a method which we can use today both as Christians and as Franciscans. What are the roots of our faith as Christians? What are the origins of the Franciscan movement? What perspectives do these bring to understanding the current crisis? How can they resource faithful Franciscan living today?

Deuteronomy itself is fundamentally a process of dynamic interpretation, always connecting the most significant issues to the circumstance of the day.

In Deuteronomy 1:5 we read, ‘Moses undertook to *expound* this law as follows:’ He did not merely reiterate the Torah of Sinai, rather he reinterpreted it for an agricultural economy.

In Deuteronomy 5:3, Moses acknowledges that, ‘Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.’

Torah was articulated afresh in the seventh century, in the fifth century, and memorably in the time of Jesus with the refrain, ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times... But I say to you...’ (Matthew 5:21-48), and now Torah needs to be articulated afresh in our own time and place.

I hope that this is what you will be doing during your Bible Studies tomorrow morning – articulating Torah afresh for the benefit of the poor and marginalised in the current economic crisis.

As you do so, there are two fundamental concepts in the Book of Deuteronomy, which need to be borne in mind: the Sabbath and justice.

Moses seems to assume a fair amount of amnesia in the community gathered on the plains of Moab, preparing to cross the Jordan. He suspects that they have forgotten their roots so he goes back to basics: he reiterates the Ten Commandments.

In Deuteronomy 5:6-21 there are only *slight* variations in the Ten Commandments from the record of them in Exodus 20, but those variations that *do* exist are significant. As at Sinai, the first three commands concern the *love of God* and the last six commands concern the *love of neighbour*. In the centre, in Deuteronomy 5:12-15, is the sabbath command.

Whereas at Sinai the Israelites were commanded to ‘remember’ the Sabbath, in Deuteronomy they are urged to ‘observe’ or ‘keep’ it. The Hebrew verb here conveys a greater sense of urgency.¹⁰ Deuteronomy is an urgent book. Moses is an insistent person.

The actual command is the same:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.
Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God (Deuteronomy 5:12-14a)

As at Sinai, the whole household, including livestock and resident aliens, is commanded to stop work. But in Deuteronomy there is an additional phrase:

so that your male and female slave *may rest as well as you*. (Deuteronomy 5:14c)

Everyone is equal when it comes to the sabbath rest: master and slave, adult and child, male and female, human and animal, native and foreigner, *all* are commanded to rest.

Moses and the people of Israel were accustomed to social inequalities and economic distinctions. They could remember Egypt where there were vast differences between the people in power and the slaves. They could remember that the privileged people in power worked shorter hours, had lots of leisure time, and plenty of food, whilst the slaves worked all hours, without leisure, and with insufficient sustenance.

According to Deuteronomy, these inequalities and distinctions do not apply in the covenant community. *All* are to rest on the Sabbath.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, ‘Just Like You’, 172.

Whereas in Exodus 20:11 the sabbath command is grounded in creation, here in Deuteronomy it is grounded in the exodus:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:15)

Remember the roots of your faith. Remember the LORD your God, your saviour. And keep the Sabbath.

The sabbath commandment is, in Deuteronomy, a primary impetus to social justice. It is also the deuteronomic expression of the call to treat other people as we would like to be treated. 'Love your neighbour as yourself' appears in Deuteronomy as 'you shall not do any work... that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.' Love of neighbour is exemplified here in providing sabbath rest for every member of the community.

Patrick Miller points out that, 'The extension of this commandment into a kind of "sabbatical principle" providing for social justice and humane treatment in various aspects of community life can be seen in Deuteronomy 15.'¹¹ This is one of the passages I have suggested for your Bible Study tomorrow.

How can Franciscans foster life according to the sabbatical principle today?

The second fundamental concept in Deuteronomy, which I want to draw your attention to, is justice.

Hebrew has two words which signify different forms of justice: *mishpat* and *tzedekah*. *Mishpat* means retributive justice or the rule of law, whereas *tzedekah* refers to distributive justice.

Tzedekah is a difficult word to translate because it combines the two different concepts of charity and justice. Jonathan Sacks provides a helpful illustration here. If I give someone one hundred pounds, he is either entitled to it or not. If he is entitled to it, then my act is a form of justice. If he is not entitled to it, then my act is one of charity. In English the act cannot be described as both an act of justice and charity. In Hebrew *tzedekah* means both justice and charity.¹² Perhaps the practice of Fair Trade comes closest to *tzedekah*.

In the New Revised Standard Version *mishpat* tends to be translated as 'justice' and *tzedekah* as 'righteousness,' although this is not always the case. For instance, Deuteronomy 16:20 reads 'Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you.' The English word 'justice' here renders the Hebrew *tzedeq*. I suspect that this verse would resonate differently for us if we rendered it, 'Righteousness and only righteousness, you shall pursue...'

¹¹ Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 83-84.

¹² Sacks, *Dignity of Difference*, 113.

The term 'justice' in our society tends to mean retributive justice, which Brueggemann defines as giving to people what is their just desert on the basis of performance.¹³ This concept is familiar in a society in which some people receive performance related pay, either in the form of bonuses at one end of the scale, or for piecemeal work at the other.

Retributive justice is based on a system of rewards and punishments. It can be recognized in a widespread zeal for law and order. Perhaps the epitome of this view of justice is the 'life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot' of Exodus 21:23-24.

One of the few television programmes I enjoy watching is *Strictly Come Dancing*. However, during the last series I became increasingly frustrated by some of the contestants, and their professional partners, who regularly argued that they had worked extremely hard and therefore deserved to go through to the next round. This attitude derives from a view of the world based on retributive justice, but one uninformed by any sense of communal obligation.

I suspect that it is the prevalence of retributive justice in our society which causes us to struggle with the parable of the labourers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16. Surely it is not just to pay someone who has only worked for one hour the same wage as someone who has worked through the heat of the day?

Turning to Deuteronomy can help us here:

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. (Deuteronomy 24:14-15)

Retributive justice is not enough. If the LORD our God simply rewarded us according to our performance, where would we be?

Although retributive justice does appear in Deuteronomy, the overriding intention of Mosaic justice is to redistribute social goods and social power, thus it is distributive justice.¹⁴

This concept of justice recognizes that social goods and social power are unequally and destructively distributed in the world. Distributive justice recognizes that the well-being of the community requires that social goods and power, to some extent, be given up by those who have too much, for the sake of those who have not enough.

As you may know, the Common Fund in the Church of England is based on this concept. In theory each parish pays into the common fund an amount proportionate to its income. The common fund then pays for all the clergy. This ensures that poorer parishes do not go without a priest. In practice the poorer parishes give a higher percentage of their income to the common fund than the wealthier parishes. Sadly this is especially noticeable in the Diocese of London, where poor parishes in Hackney give a much higher percentage of their income to the common fund than the much wealthier parishes in the Royal Borough of Kensington and

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 737.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology*, 736.

Chelsea. As a church we still have much to learn from the teaching of Moses in Deuteronomy!

The radical principle of distributive justice is fundamental to life as the people of God.

Distributive justice is exhibited in the 'law of release' in Deuteronomy chapter 15.

Distributive justice is also demonstrated in Deuteronomy's preoccupation with the alien, the orphan and the widow, those who lack both resources and the means to secure resources. This concern for the poor is amply attested to in Deuteronomy 24:10-22, another one of the passages I have suggested for your Bible Study tomorrow.

How can Franciscans continue the struggle for distributive justice?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am aware that I have raised more questions than I have given answers.

I hope that I have provided you with some new insights into the Book of Deuteronomy.

I encourage you to use Deuteronomy as a valuable resource for developing a Franciscan response to some of the issues raised by the current financial and economic crisis.

I urge you to foster life according to the sabbatical principal in both the church and the world.

I urge you to continue the struggle for distributive justice in both the church and the world.

Above all, I encourage you to return to your roots as Franciscan Christians, and to articulate Franciscan poverty afresh, as you seek to live faithfully in the present.

Please allow me to finish with a prayer by Walter Brueggemann. It is entitled 'No More Sinking Sand.'¹⁵

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, edited by Edwin Searcy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 16-17.

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