

Reflection for Sunday 25th October 2020
Deuteronomy 34:1 – 12 and Matthew 34:34 – 46

In ancient times, philosophers debated as to whether it is possible for a complete absence of matter to exist. Generally, they agreed that it was not. It wasn't until the 17th century that empirical studies began, which led, amongst other things, to the invention of the first barometer, a device which relies upon atmospheric pressure acting upon mercury; high pressure pushing the mercury up into a vacuum and low pressure causing the mercury level to fall.

Page | 1

The word vacuum comes from the Latin *vacuus*, meaning empty. The term "vacant" when applied to a person, implies, in a derogatory fashion, that the lights are on but there is nobody at home. As one prone to daydream in class – I was not entirely unfamiliar with this description in my youth. A vacuum being devoid of matter --- there is little or no activity to be found there --- as a result of the absence of any kind of stimulation – of particles colliding. Hence our general understanding that nothing happens in a vacuum.

The Gospel reading for today continues the running theme in Matthew concerning Jesus' clashes with Jewish religious authority. Last week we saw the attempt to trap Jesus with the question concerning paying tax to the Emperor and today a leading lawyer ask Jesus which is the most important commandment of the Jewish Law. This, seemingly innocent and respectful question is not asked in a vacuum. There is a context --- and that context involves collision – the frequent occasions on which Jesus – in his actions and his teachings – has bounced off--- come into conflict with – the Scribes and the Pharisees. They continue to try to trap Jesus. It is hugely important that we understand that context when reading this passage ---- but it is also important that we understand the deeper context --- which is why the Gospels are not read in isolation from what we call The Old Testament --- or rather more respectfully to Jews --- the Hebrew Scriptures.

Our first reading – of course --- is drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures and concerns the final hours of Moses – with whom – again – we have been engaged over recent weeks as we have touched upon certain incidents during the 40 year pilgrimage in the wilderness. Now Moses is given a glimpse of the Promised Land to which God has led him and his active role in the drama comes to an end. Moses dies and he is buried in the Plains of Moab – the people

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observing a long period of mourning in his honour. Yet even as the Moses narrative draws to a close there is reference to his greatness – his uniqueness --- in which reference is promise that he will never be forgotten and that his influence will continue to be felt as the saga unfolds.

Page | 2

It is --- of course ---- the law given to Moses which is the foundation of the elaborate Jewish religion which has grown and developed by the time of the ministry of Jesus. It is in this law - -- in this elaborate religion --- that the Scribes and Pharisees claim expertise. And in their clashes with Jesus it is to the law of Moses that the Scribes and the Pharisees repeatedly turn. Jesus not uninterested in the law --- but his true interest lies much deeper than that. Jesus too has studied Moses and the other patriarchs of Judaism --- but in a very much deeper and more spiritual way.

To get some insight into that deeper spiritual dimension we need – perhaps – to go right back to the beginning of the Moses narrative --- and once again to think about context --- to remember that the law is not given in a vacuum. That context – in which the law is given – goes all the way back to Abraham --- but in a more immediate sense – the context is to be found in the life of Moses. Moses is born as one of the Children of Israel – one of the descendants of Jacob and his forefathers Isaac and Abraham. The children of Israel are in Egypt because they were welcomed there by their kinsman Joseph --- but generations on – they are -- in Moses’ time --- slaves. Affected by the regulation which requires male Hebrew children to be slain at birth – Moses escapes due to the ingenuity of his mother – and he ends up raised as a Prince of Egypt by Pharaoh’s daughter. But Moses is deeply aware of his Jewishness --- and so he steps in to defend a maltreated kinsman and kills the Egyptian slave master. He has no option but to flee to a distant place where he marries and adopts the role of shepherd to his father-in-law’s flocks.

It is therefore as a refugee that we meet Moses just prior to his first life-changing encounter with God. He is not destitute, but he is in a wilderness --- again – not just physically as he wanders with the flock --- but spiritually. Imagine the emotional turmoil Moses is undergoing. Separated not only from his own Hebrew kinsfolk but also from his adopted Egyptian family -

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-- Moses is suffering a crisis of identity --- who and what is he? Doubtless he feels guilt and shame at having taken a life. Doubtless too --- he is wondering "*What is life all about?*" Everything that seemed sure, certain and foundational in his life has been snatched away. Moses is a lost soul, and it is this Moses who spots a bush that is aflame but not burning up. It is this Moses who turns aside to investigate this curious phenomenon. It is – I think --- critically important to note --- that it is not coercion and it is not fear --- which causes Moses to turn aside to investigate the bush. It is in a spirit of dissatisfaction – of searching and enquiry – at a time when he is desperately seeking answers to life's big questions. This is important context, and it is from this that everything else flows. It is from these first few steps that the 40-year pilgrimage begins --- the pilgrimage in which the law will be given. Had the unsettled and searching Moses not turned aside then we might legitimately ask --- would the law have come to us?

Page | 3

Many years later --- with the law now the established and central pillar of being one of the children of Israel --- Jesus looks deeper. He looks behind the law and he sees the all-important context. Jesus recognises that by the time the law is given to Moses that initial restless searching has led Moses to a tried and tested relationship with God. Perhaps at first Moses courage in following God stems from his desire for answers – his hope that there is more to life than the wilderness. But by the time the law is given that relationship with God is founded upon love --- the unfailing love Moses has experienced from God and the love which he, Moses, feels for God as a consequence. Moses loves because God loved him first. The law is not a straitjacket, or a chastising rod given to keep humanity in check – it is an expression of love – it serves as signposts on the road to life – and salvation --- wholeness and healing – fulfilment and true freedom. And if any – religion --- which calls upon the law of God – does not have those same priorities --- then it is a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal – it is anathema --- because it has not its foundation in love. Love is always the context – real love which exists only where we brush against and engage in activity one with another. Context is everything and the activity of love is God's context – it is the only context thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen