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Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

PATHOS ON MT NEBO

Sermon by Bruce Barber

Deuteronomy 34: 4 : The word of God to Moses: 'I have let you see the land with your eyes, but you shall not go over there'.

There are many mountains in the Bible: Mt Sinai, Mt Hermon, Mt Zion, Mt Calvary to name but some. Invariably, they are places of crucial theological significance.

Today in the person of Moses, Israel - and indeed we ourselves - find that we are standing on another much lesser known peak, Mt Nebo. But with no less significance. For what is about to happen on this mountain is an event of considerable pathos: the poignant end of the Moses saga. Unfolded for us over the past ten weeks, it began with his birth, his call, his leadership of the people of Israel in the wilderness wanderings, until its climax today where we encounter him on Mt Nebo on the threshold of the people's entry into the Promised Land.

And what does Moses hear? We can hardly conceive of a word that could lead to greater anguish than this: 'I have let you see the land with your eyes, but you shall not go over there'. Here is one who has been faithful to his call all his life; who for 40 years had endured the responsibility and loneliness of leading what must surely rank as the longest if not the most gruelling pilgrimage of all time when - just at the point of its culmination - he is robbed of its triumph.

Recall what you know about Moses. He is undoubtedly a strong man, unequalled - as we are told this morning - for all the mighty deeds and displays of power that he performed in the sight of all Israel. We have heard over these weeks how he steadfastly pointed his people to the will and promises of God, and of how he kept their ears open, refusing to let them drag their feet when their spirits failed, even when he himself did not understand how it would all end. And now, just as that end is in sight, he is prevented from entering into what he saw. It is all so unfair. One might have thought - quite reasonably - that having endured everything he might have been allowed to finish what he had started. After all, he is reputed to be 120 years old, and we are told, as if to corroborate our sense of injustice, 'with sight unimpaired and vigour unabated'. It surely wouldn't have hurt for him to be given whatever time might be needed for a celebratory conclusion.

It would be all too easy to psychologise this. Who of us could not identify with such an experience? How many could testify to being unable to finish what has been started, despite every prospect of a happy conclusion? Who, having worked unceasingly, or endured so stoically, has not known the all too human frailty of observing the spoils go to another? Crippling illness, early retrenchment, peer jealousy, CEO vindictiveness, the sheer devilry of the system, premature death - all such are calculated to rob us at some time or another of our expectations. We well know how Moses might be feeling: the tragic sense of life.

All of this is entirely understandable. The only problem is: it is nowhere in the text. Rather, all that we are told as a consequence of God's decision is that Moses dies 'at the

Lord's command', content to pass the baton to another. That, at the very least, is a recipe for humility. Presumably we are to learn from this that Moses' gift to us today on Mt Nebo is no less than his gift to us from Egypt, from the wilderness, and from Mt Sinai. Indeed, this may prove to be the greatest gift of all. Especially perhaps for those of us who are now almost as old as Moses, but who in younger days had caught something of a vision for the vitality of the Church, only to have to face the reality that we have not been able to bring it about. Well, we might accuse God, but Moses certainly didn't: no trace of resentment at his replaceability, no anger at premature removal, no petulance in the face of disappointment. Every such all too human response we know about is absent.

The point is that no one, not even a Moses, is indispensable to the larger endeavour. Here on Mt Nebo, Moses confesses and serves a faith whose promises are not given to us in the measure we might desire. Here is revealed to us one from whom many must see the pathos of our own situation: Moses saw clearly, but he could not enter into what he saw. The poorest child of that people who entered into the land of promise had what Moses, who led them to that land, could never have: sight without realisation, knowledge without possession. The fact is that Moses knew more than anyone what was intended for Israel - but he died outside the land. The same fate was to befall an equally prophetic figure - John the Baptist - who testified to the imminent coming of the reign of God, but who did not live to see its flowering.

The poignancy of the end of Moses is surely good news for us all, especially, certainly, for those who like him find themselves on the outside of that reality which Sunday by Sunday the liturgy is rehearsing for us in what used to be called 'the public worship of God'. In an age which imagines that it has to experience everything to live an authentic life, there is a blessing in being like Moses - able to view but not to experience the object of sight. That is to say, there is ample room for the many who do not know if they ought to call themselves Christian at all, but who have caught a glimpse of the view from Mt Nebo, and, wistfully perhaps, would like to be part of it all if they could. Today they - and we - are being reminded that in the providence of God, and despite the predictable strictures of somewhat desperate would-be evangelists, there is a blessing in just viewing the distant scene, even if we can't get across to the other side.

Reassuring though this might be in an age suspicious of commitment, there is yet more for those who look hard enough. For between the pathos of Moses and, let's say, the confidence of the apostle Paul, stands One who not only saw the promised land, but indeed did go over into it. And he went on the same terms as Moses did, precisely by his willingness to die. Jesus himself secured the promise of that land, and indeed of all lands, not as did Moses by means of a peaceable death, but by a violent one. Is Jesus then merely another, albeit greater, Moses? He is frequently so understood, and therefore misunderstood. If he were simply another but a greater Moses, there would be no grounds for the solid joy which Paul, to name but one, extols. Is it merely the case that the first Moses sees, but does not enter, whereas the second both sees and enters and makes the earth secure? Well perhaps, but that is not sufficient to account for the confidence that Christians down through the ages have grasped, have celebrated, and have made their own.

For the gospel is not merely that the new Joshua saw and did go over. It is rather that he saw - yes; that he did go over - yes. But that he took us with him. Jesus not only saw the promised earth - the renewed creation - and he not only inherited it, but we inherit it in and with him. To those who think that they have to do absolutely everything

themselves, the good news is that we are there in that Promised Land because he is there. In this he is not only our view, he is, we might say our visa. None of us is over there because of who we are - because of our faith or our obedience or our good works, just as none of us is deprived of our visa because we assume that we lack these things. There is no gospel in seeing the matter this way, for that would be merely conventional religiosity after the manner of the Pharisees in today's gospel. Rather, he is there - in our place - and we are there because he is there.

In the final analysis, Christian faith is blindingly simple. We live in a society which, with ever seducing offers called 'spirituality', invites us on the forever-mercurial quest of 'discovering ourselves'. Our churches - apparently losing interest in the gospel - frequently seem intent on the same project. What Christian faith invites us to, on the contrary, is a much larger discovery - to discover that we have been discovered: that One has borne our humanity from birth to death - its anxieties, its tragedies, its misplaced ideals, its despair, its ultimate nothingness - has lived, endured and transformed these realities into life, love, hope and fulfilment.

Those who stand on Mt Nebo with Moses are indeed blessed as those who long to participate in this vision, but for whatever reason do not feel that they are able to enter fully into their inheritance. As such, they know, even as they know that they do not know fully. But the real point is to know that we have already been known, and always are known utterly. And only the gospel can offer us this.

If the word to Moses was: 'I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there', the word to us is rather: 'I have let you see it with your eyes, and I have taken you there'.

Therefore to the One who made this word into such a deed, be all praise and thanksgiving, now and forever.