

Epiphany 6
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Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 30:15 – 20

Psalm 119:1 - 8

1 Corinthians 3:1 -9

Matthew 5:11 - 37

Freedom is our song: choose life

The metaphor of crossing the river is widely used in our culture and literature to refer to a major transition in life. The challenge of crossing the river, whether the Rubicon, the Jordan or the river of Death that *Pilgrim's Progress* pictures as separating us from the Celestial City, inevitably faces those who confront it with significant choices affecting their destiny, in this world or the next. As Israel emerged from the Wilderness and prepared to cross the Jordan into a new life Moses spoke to the people: what would this transition mean for their faith and life together? It was an ominous moment, full of risk and possibility. From the time of Abraham their faith had been in God who was present to them in their wanderings as well as their slavery in Egypt. Now sojourners and strangers were about to become settlers. On the other side of the Jordan there would be many alternative options involving life and property, faith and ethics. Whom or what would they trust with their life? What guiding story would they take as theirs? Would the modes of power and governance that kept them together in their Bedouin like existence be sufficient for their new context? Settled people who grow crops build houses and set up businesses are confronted with all the temptations that come with prosperity and abundance. Risks and dangers, clothed in the language of real and imagined possibilities, lay in wait for Moses' flock.

As leader Moses was responsible for nurturing his community in such a way that it remained faithful to all that has brought them thus far. He had to remind them of the big picture and keep before them their guiding story that had its roots in God, who said: "I will be your God and you will be my people" and made freedom their song. He made it very clear: there is a way to life and prosperity, and there is a way to death and adversity. Which will they choose?

The linking of life and prosperity and death and adversity shows there is more to this than mere living or dying. There is life in which we thrive and there is death in which rather than being exterminated, we continue to live, but suffer through lack of joy, well-being, abundance and a sense of security. Moses knows that life revolves around keeping the Commandments of God. He puts forward the options in stark "if-then" clauses that arouse fear in us that he is advocating some sort of works righteousness, or a simple-minded tick-the-box approach to a set of rules or disciplines. But Moses is putting before the people the choice of a covenantal relationship that links us to God and to one another in ethics guided by love and justice, based on Torah, the law. Torah is the portal through which we receive the wisdom, grounded in the Peace of God that enables us to keep faith with the covenant. Moses' meaning is that living faithfully in the peace of God, shalom, is the key to living rightly with each other, and is the pathway to the good life. In contrast death involves refusing to live in the peace of God and facing the consequences of ethics based on different social paradigms and the alternative consequences that flow.

According to the broader context of Deuteronomy, living in honour of God in bears fruit in covenantal actions towards one another such as: sharing feasts with the hungry [14:27 -29], cancelling debts that the poor cannot pay [[15:1-11], organising government to guard against excessive wealth [17:14-20], leaving the residue of the harvest for the disadvantaged [24:19-22], sharing hospitality with runaway slaves [23:15-16], limiting punishment in order to protect human dignity [25:1-3]. [Brueggemann, *Texts*, p 138]

The list goes on, but the meaning is that within the covenant relationship of faith, obedience to particular rules is grounded in a deep valuing of our common life before God and the quality of social relationships we want to maintain. It means refusing to live by exploitation and putting checks and balances in place to keep it that way. It means tempering the exercise of power with mercy as well as justice. It means deliberately curbing the tendency toward greed and exploitation. It means disallowing brutality as a means of settling disputes or penalising crime. The community that lives in obedience to the law of God is not meant to be obsessed with rules. The real centre of gravity is a commitment to preserve a particular quality of relationships. This adds up to a recipe for life in which people thrive, rather than struggle and die from competition or deprivation. That is why freedom is our song.

Across the Jordan there would be sources of authority, which offered alternative ethics. In biblical terms, this meant “other gods”. In this text the “if-then” passages are exhortations to refuse to listen to other gods. “If” you refuse to embrace the world-views and social practices that are hostile to the ways I have put before you, says Moses, “then” you will live and prosper.

The Canaanite fertility cults mentioned in the Bible have achieved a bad reputation because of their link to deviant sexual practices. But this is not their real challenge. “Fertility religion” amounts to a scheme for self-sufficiency, based on manageable procedures over which we have control and outside of which there is no other authority [Brueggemann, *Texts*, p 139]. The cults represented a commitment to trust in a system that amounted to having life on one’s own terms. In the world today the ideology of the Free Market is the leading false god linked as it is to a view of individual freedom that does not have a sense of covenant community in view. “If “we go that way, says Moses, “then” we will perish. This is not a perishing wrought by God’s supernatural intervention. It means “you will be caught up in patterns of social relations that diminish human possibility. In surrendering to your own desires and placing them first, you will not curb violence, you will promote fear and greed, will not try to dissolve anger and hate and will have less respect for the other. In their new social context Moses exhorted the people to remember to choose covenantal relationships first, because God, who gave the covenant, first chose them. It is the same as choosing to live by the Spirit, rather than the flesh.

This helps us understand what Jesus says in Sermon on the Mount. Neither the Beatitudes, with which it begins nor the section that follows the exhortation to be light and salt for the world should be approached as “works” to be fulfilled in a “tick the box” way. The discussion of issues such as those mentioned today, murder, divorce, anger, adultery, or swearing false oaths, all need to be held within a context of God’s grace towards us and the call to live with God and one another on a basis that refuses to reduce social relations to commodities to be exploited through desire, greed, untruthfulness or the corrupt exercise of power. It is a question of which “way” we will choose to live: on the basis of relationship lived in the sight of God, or on the basis that what is good for me is best. The cross of Christ, which has figured strongly in our readings this season, is the sign that leads us to the first way, and it stands firmly and solidly against the second.

The choices confronting Moses and the people “out of Egypt” are relevant to the situation the Egyptians are facing today as they prepare to cross a political river into a new form of social life. The promise of a society governed on civil democratic principles enlivens the hearts of many. But will it be realised? What version of democracy will it be? What guiding story will the Egyptians choose, and whose values will be at the heart of it? Will they choose life that gives priority to curbing power and greed in favour of communally focussed relationships that privilege fairness and the rights of all to a good life? It is an ominous moment full of risk and possibility. We can only pray that they will be given the power to choose a life-giving guiding story that has the ability to make freedom their song. God grant it will be so.
