

John Docherty, October 29, 2017
“... turn back, you mortals ...”

The suggested lectionary readings for today are a curious mix of passages. The Mennonite version of the lectionary suggests an overarching theme of “You shall love”, and includes readings from :

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 (which, in its turn, includes the injunction to love your neighbour as yourself);

Psalms 1 (which expounds the virtues of the man who delights in the law of the Lord and is like a tree planted by streams of water, flourishing and bringing forth fruit);

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 (in which Paul expresses his giving of himself on behalf of the faith);

and Matthew 22:34-46 (in which Jesus underlines the fact that the Law and the Prophets hinge on the command to love God with everything you have and to love your neighbour as much as yourself – coming full circle from the Leviticus passage).

The *full* Revised Common Lectionary, has these same passages, but also the passage from Deuteronomy (in which Moses is allowed to view the Promised Land from afar, but dies before being able to enter it), and the passage from Psalm 90 that we read this morning – a psalm that underscores the fact that we are *mortal*; that we return to dust.

We didn't read the entire psalm, but the middle verses include the observation that we can hope for maybe 70 years of life, or 80 years if we're really robust.

But these 70 or 80 years, according to the psalm, are generally a life of toil and suffering; and the latter part of the psalm includes a plea to God to give us a break occasionally (i.e. Give us at least as much rest as suffering). It's also, incidentally, a psalm that is attributed to Moses, rather than to David.

So, as a melancholy Scot, I naturally gravitated towards the passages that were *not* suggested by the Mennonite lectionary. It's not that I'm contrary or anything, it's just that those passages have a touch of pathos that is lacking in the other passages; and pathos is what we Scots thrive on.

Not to mention the fact that we are within a few days of Hallowe'en, and All Saints Day – quite an ancient acknowledgement of the fact that we have a foot in two realities :

- we are living, breathing, beings;
- we are also mortal, *mortal*, carrying the fact of our inevitable death in our bodies.

This Book is a compendium of examples of humanity reaching out to God for comfort, for reassurance, for mercy in the face of that mortality. It's not always a Theological textbook so much as a poetic history of our search for meaning, in the certain knowledge that we all will die someday.

The two passages that were read this morning, for example, highlight this perfectly, and the link between them (the tradition that the psalm was written by Moses) intrigued me. It got me wondering about the fact that Moses was allowed to see the Promised Land, but not allowed to enter. It almost seems like a cruel gesture towards Moses, and if it were the only glimpse we had of this moment, it might well leave us with any number of questions :

- what was going through Moses' mind at this point?
- Was he thrilled that the people of Israel were finally going to enter the promised land, even if he wasn't?
- Was he filled with regrets; wondering what might have been if he hadn't disobeyed God in the wilderness of Zin?
- Was he angry at God, feeling that on balance, his positive actions far outweighed his one major mistake?
- Was he desperate to continue living, even though we're told he was already 120 years old? (mind you, we're also told that his eye hadn't dimmed and that his 'natural force' hadn't abated)
- Was he ready? Was he prepared to accept that his life had run its course, and that it was his time?

Fortunately, this passage from Deuteronomy 34 isn't the only glimpse we have of this moment on Mount Nebo. We have a foreshadowing of it in chapter 32, and we have a bit of an interlude in chapter 33.

The passage in chapter 32:48-51 is basically the depiction of God telling Moses that he's screwed up big time :

“On that very day the Lord addressed Moses as follows: ‘Ascend this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, across from Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites for a possession; you shall die there on the mountain that you ascend and shall be gathered to your kin, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kin; because both of you broke faith with me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to maintain my holiness among the Israelites.’”

I like this image of Moses being “gathered to his kin” / “gathered to his people” / “gathered to his ancestors”. I recognize it can simply be understood as another way of saying “you're going to die” / “you're going to go the way of all flesh”, rather than trying to literally imply that he will be rejoined to his ancestors.

But it suggests to me a certain continuity of life in the midst of death. It suggests a certain “connectedness” to our existence in the face of our mortality.

In other words, it suggests to me that we're created to share this life with others. We're not just born, live out 70 or 80 struggling years then die, only to be forgotten.

The term that is sometimes translated in the Old Testament as “mortals” (the term that is used in the passage from Psalm 90) is a translation of the Hebrew “ben adam”, son of Adam, or son of Man. It's a very poetic turn of phrase that underlines this lineage of which we're all a part. Whether you believe that there was a literal and unique “Adam” and a literal and unique “Eve”, or whether you believe we are the product of millions of years of evolution doesn't really matter : the term serves to link us all together as part of the human family – the family of mortals.

When I give training workshops on the effects of torture on individuals, I sometimes ask the participants : “where do I start, and where do I end?”

By one measure, the answer might be that I start and end with this body that encases me, this “mortal coil”. In other words the physical John Docherty starts at my feet, and ends at the top of my head or the tips of my fingers.

But by another measure, I don't start and end with the extremities of my skin. Apart from the fact that I carry with me my aspirations for the future and my memories of the past – which already frees me from the limitations of the “now” – I also carry with me all of the myriad ways that I'm connected to the world around me –

and especially to the human world around me.

I'm the husband of Mary-Lou; I'm the father of Robert, Isaac and Elizabeth; I'm the grandfather of Hayden and Eliott; I'm the son of John and Betty; I'm the brother of Rosemary, Kathleen and Kevin; I'm the nephew of Martin, Jimmy, Nan and May; I'm the neighbour of Ethser, Daniel, Denise and Nadine; I'm the work colleague of Jairo, Maisan, Monique and Musuk; I'm the guy who officiated at June's wedding yesterday; the guy who baptized Hannah, Nicole, and Wivine; the guy who tried to help commemorate the life and death of Lola Schmucker; the guy who stroked Dave's arm as he lay on a gurney in the emergency ward after breaking his neck.

I wasn't born to live 70 or 80 years and then die and be forgotten, any more than you were born to live 70 or 80 years and then die and be forgotten.

I was born to enter into relationships, and it is those relationships that will define the limits of my mortality. When I reach the end of my 70 or 80 years of toil and trouble (to quote Moses in Psalm 90), I'll be gathered to my kin in 2 ways : i.e. I'll return to the dust from which we're all drawn, but if I'm lucky, I'll also be surrounded by some of those who've shared my life; who will sit by my side and wait with me as I approach my last breath.

If I'm lucky I'll be surrounded by those who share my mortality – not in the sense that they, too, are mortal, but in the sense that they *share* my *mortality* by having shared my *life*.

And, of course, there's another relationship that defines my mortality.

In chapter 32 of Deuteronomy Moses is told by God that he'll die on Mount Nebo because he was disobedient in the wilderness of Zin. In chapter 34 of Deuteronomy Moses dies, and is buried by God, in sight of the Promised Land.

I said earlier that if this was the only glimpse we had of that moment, it might seem cruel and spiteful.

But in chapter 33 of Deuteronomy we have a bit of a glimpse into how Moses himself views this turn of events.

In verses 26 and 27 he has this to say (this is from the Revised Standard Version, which is quite a different translation from the New Revised Standard Version):

““There is none like God, O Jesh’urun, who rides through the heavens to your help, and in his majesty through the skies. The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”

One doesn't pick up any sense of anger, or disappointment, or regret. This is just a very small snippet of a long poem of praise to God in which Moses delivers a litany of the many ways that God has blessed each of the tribes of the people of Israel.

This, it seems, is the relationship that defined Moses' life, and that should be part of the definition of our lives as well. We're told in 34:10 “... and there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face ...”.

This is a very intimate kind of relationship – the Lord knew him face to face. We're also told the following :

“... Moses, the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no-one knows his burial place to this day.”

The implication, of course, is that he was buried by God; that in his last moments – as he was taking his last breath – his companion was God.

And I suppose that's also the case for each of us as we breathe our last – we say our goodbyes, we shed our tears, we squeeze the hands of those we love, and then look to God for companionship.

This mortal, this man like you and me, this son of Adam, as he approached those last moments was able to give these words to those who had shared *his* life : “The eternal God is our dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”