

Sermon for Mattins on the Seventh Sunday after Trinity, 15th July 2018
Deuteronomy 28:1-14; Acts 28:17-31

*'I'm the urban spaceman, baby; I've got speed
I've got everything I need
I'm the urban spaceman, baby; I can fly
I'm a supersonic guy'* [Neil Innes, 1968]

The great Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band reached number five in the hit parade, in the UK charts, in 1968, with that song, 'I'm the urban spaceman'. The writer of the song, Neil Innes, that you might remember from children's TV programmes, is still performing, and occasionally he still sings that song. He was at the Claygate Music Festival last year; and very good he was, too.

What is success, in life? What does it mean to be a 'supersonic guy'? For the Israelites in the Old Testament, having come out of Egypt, crossed over the Red Sea, and then being stuck in the desert for a long time maybe not literally 40 years, but that's what the Bible says - everything paled into insignificance when compared with the need for them to get to the Promised Land, the place of safety, the land overflowing with milk and honey. That must be the same sort of feeling that you have if you are stuck in a refugee camp in Jordan, say. Northern Europe must look pretty decent as an ultimate destination: you might well use such expressions as 'the promised land' in talking about that.

But interestingly, what Moses says God has told him is slightly more complicated, and if anything, even better. If the Israelites will keep to their bargain with God,

*[I]f thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day....
... all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field. ... And the Lord shall make thee plenteous in goods, in the fruit of thy body, and in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy ground, in the land which the Lord sware unto thy fathers to give thee.[Deut. 28:1- 3,11]*

In other words, if you worship God, you will do well. If you go through the list of blessings, it is very much a promise of prosperity.

Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy ground, and the fruit of thy cattle, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep. [Deut. 28:4]

Of course, the converse is true.

[I]f thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee:

*Cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shalt thou be in the field.
Cursed shall be thy basket and thy store.*

They are the other side of the coin. Instead of blessings, you will get cursed.

*Cursed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy land, the increase of thy kine,
and the flocks of thy sheep.
Cursed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and cursed shalt thou be when thou goest
out. [Deut.28:15-19]*

Compare all that with the blessings that Jesus goes into in chapter 5 of St Matthew's Gospel.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness:
Blessed are the merciful:
Blessed are the pure in heart: ...
Blessed are the peacemakers:*

And then follows Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount - which isn't a 'prosperity gospel'. It doesn't say, 'Do all these good things, and they will make you rich - or powerful, or successful.'

*Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink;
Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into
barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. [Matt. 6:25-26]*

So who is it who is talking? In the Book of Deuteronomy, God is talking to Moses; or rather God is giving a message to the Israelites through Moses, who is a prophet.

In the New Testament, even though Jesus says, in the Sermon on the Mount, that He has not come to 'abolish the Law or the prophets', (and the Law includes a lot of the principles laid down in Deuteronomy, for example); nevertheless the whole accent has changed: indeed, you could almost think that God had changed.

The kingdom of God, to the Christians, is not really like the Promised Land was to the Israelites. It isn't really a place, and there aren't any special foods. No milk and honey - although perhaps quinoa is a sort of manna: who knows? As Christians, we aim instead to seek the kingdom of Heaven and to gain eternal life.

In both cases, whether we're following the Old Testament God, or whether we are Christians, it's a good thing to do what we believe God has commanded us to do.

If we are Old Testament Israelites, it's pretty straightforward. God has made a contract with us, a covenant: if you do such-and-such, then I will do such-and-such in return - a solemn agreement. You mustn't worship anyone except me; you must follow the other nine commandments and all the second-order rules and regulations which are set out in the first five books of the Old Testament. If you do that, God says, 'I'll make you successful and secure in the Promised Land. If you don't, I will punish you.'

St Paul, in effect, tried to reconcile and make sense of these two visions, it's very interesting to see how St Paul got on, on his way to Rome to appear before the emperor. He got some of the local Jewish people together - they were keen to hear what he had to say, because they had heard about the Christians, whom they thought of as a sect of the Jewish community - but they hadn't heard any good things.

They were a bit suspicious. Paul laid out the whole story, from Moses up to and including the life of Jesus. In his teaching, he was telling them about God. And off they went, afterwards, discussing what he had said.

Some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not. [Acts 28:24]

Paul remembered that Isaiah had also observed that some people's ears were completely closed to any kind of enlightenment. He could tell them about the Kingdom, but they wouldn't listen. That's pretty similar to what happens today. Not a lot has changed. Some people believe, and some people don't.

I sometimes think that perhaps that has to do with our not really knowing who or what God is. We blithely read stories in the Bible, where God said this, and God did this, and that - on the face of it, some very human-sounding things. Making a contract, making a covenant, for example.

But at the same time, God is said to be all-powerful, all-knowing: to be feared, even. I'm not sure that He really speaks to people in the way that you read about in the Old Testament; and in particular, speaking to the people through the prophets. I think that we would, to some extent, not recognise some of the aspects of God as He is put in the Old Testament.

He is said to speak through Moses; He is said to make things all right; he endorses the idea of material prosperity, especially in the Promised Land; he

favours some people over others; and He is to be feared. In a lot of the Old Testament, just as in our lesson, there isn't a lot about love. God is a fearsome god rather than a loving god. 'God so loved the world ..' is very much a New Testament message.

The other interesting thing is that the objective in the New Testament is not the Promised Land, so much as to be 'saved', to gain eternal life. Is that a selfish message? Is one supposed to turn in on oneself in order to draw near to God?

If you believe and trust in God now, as opposed to 3,000 years ago, do you indeed become the 'Urban Spaceman'?

*I wake up every morning with a smile upon my face
My natural exuberance spills out all over the place
I'm the urban spaceman, I'm intelligent and clean*

...

Just as we haven't seen any burning bushes or received tablets from heaven recently, I'm rather worried that a lot of what we are, blithely, reading in our Bibles and letting flow over us, without perhaps challenging it, engaging with it, is open to an ultimate question.

*I never let my friends down
I've never made a boob
I'm a glossy magazine, an advert in the tube
I'm the urban spaceman, baby; here comes the twist--
I don't exist...*

Too many people think of God as the urban spaceman; and too many people know what comes at the end. We don't follow the Urban Spaceman. Frankly, we don't follow the God of Moses much. Do we follow the gospel of Jesus?

It won't take us to the promised land. But it will change us. If you believe and trust in Him, you will want to follow Jesus' two vital commandments, to love God - and to love your neighbour as yourself. Think how they were, even when they had St Paul himself preaching to them. Which side of the line would you be on? Is this something you can believe in - or not? I hope and pray that you can.

Amen

Hugh Bryant