

Fifth Sunday in Lent

10th April 2011

Deuteronomy 7: 7-11, Ps 45: 1-2, 6-9, Hebrews 4: 8-16, Luke 7: 36-50

May I speak in the name of the one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Recently a friend of mine who lives in White Gum Valley converted to the Jewish Faith, to Judaism, so she decided to have mezuzah party. What's a mezuzah? You see one on the cover of the service sheet. It's a cylindrical box, about 15cm long containing certain passages of scripture, which you fix on the doorpost of your house. Why? We heard it in our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy:

‘You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul,
and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand
and fix them as an emblem on your forehead.
Teach them to your children,
talking about them when you are at home and when you are away,
when you lie down and when you rise.
Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates...’
(Deut 11:18-20).

So religious Jews were to teach the faith to their children as we teach our children the Lord's Prayer and some wear special pouches on their arm or forehead and most would have a mezuzah on their doorpost. Being Jews, this immediately sets up a rabbinic debate: how many doorposts? Should you have one on every external door, the back door as well as the front? Should you have one on the door of every room in the house? – but then what counts as a room? Is a bathroom a room? Is a cupboard a room? Is a bicycle shed a room? But most Jews are content to have one mezuzah on their front door.

So at this party – which was a very jolly affair – the scroll was blessed and placed inside the box and fixed to the doorpost. Then we all went outside and come back in through the front door to acknowledge the mezuzah in its place.

All these practices are about reminders - reminders of the presence of God. Mezuzah boxes have various designs, but they always have one feature, the three pronged

symbol you see in the picture. It's the Hebrew letter, *shin*, שׁ which stands for *Shaddai*, one of the names of God, usually translated as ‘Almighty’, though it really means the provider, the source of life. The letter itself looks a bit like a fire, or like a burning bush, so just placing it there speaks of the presence of the Divine

The letter is the first letter of the first word of the first of the texts contained inside this box. If you look at the line of Hebrew script at the top of the page – looking at the

top right because Hebrew is written right to left you see the three-pronged letter again: *Shema* ‘*Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad* –
Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.
And you shall love the LORD your God
with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

For a Jew, this verse (Deuteronomy 6:4) is the central text of their Bible and their faith. Why? Because it’s about identity; it answers the question, ‘*Who am I?*’

If I’m a Jew then I am a member of Israel and I stand before God, the Lord of all the earth, the God beyond all knowing and all naming (the God whose name is so holy that though it appears in that line of Hebrew script it is never pronounced). So a Jew has an identity in relationship – a member of Israel, a lover of God. This says we do not make ourselves, and whether we like it or not we exist in relationship with the God who speaks and calls us to hear.

This is a text to build relationship and an identity with. Children learn to say it at a young age (as Christian children learn the Lord’s Prayer) and learn to say it evening and morning, “when they lie down and when they rise”. It’s the first of the texts written on the scrolls in side the *mezuzah* – so the *mezuzah* itself is a reminder, and that three pronged letter says it all, ‘*Hear, O Israel....*’ As Christians, we show we stand in the same tradition by saying it to (not always, but quite often) as we gather for worship – we said it about ten minutes ago.

So the *Shema* ‘ (‘Hear!’) presents us with an identity of hearing. Who am I? – the one who hears God, and loves God. But it also answers another key question: ‘*What day is it?*’ – to which the answer is always ‘Today’. You see that in the fourth line:

‘Keep these words that I am commanding you *today* ...’

You see it in the first verse of the passage from Deuteronomy 11, which ends up with the *mezuzah* but begins ‘If you will *hear* the commandments I am commanding you *today....*’

What that says is that although the faith is immensely old, going back 3000 years to Moses, Abraham, Noah, it is new and fresh every day, because the world springs forth from the Divine every day, and every day we can choose afresh to hear God, to love God, live in that relationship. It says, we can’t rely on our parents’ faith, or the faith of our community: *today* is the day to meet God. And there’s one more text which emphasises that (also on the front page of the service sheet) from Ps 95:

‘O that *today* you would listen to his voice,
do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah
and as at that day at Massah in the wilderness
when your ancestors tested me.’

This is a memory of Israel’s time in the wilderness as a time of testing and rebellion in the hardness of their hearts – and I talked about this 4 weeks ago when our theme was ‘testing’. That is the past; but, it says, *today* is the day to listen to God’s voice. This psalm, known as the Venite, with its call to listen and respond, has been used by Jews,

and then by Christians, in morning worship for centuries. It's not a bad way to start each day, as you cast your mind forward over what the day will bring: 'O that today you would listen to God's voice: harden not your heart'.

So here we have this incredibly strong and ancient tradition of Judaism, a tradition which is quite complicated at the edges but very simple in its core: it boils down to three words: hear God today. And that strength and simplicity is very comforting, if you're in tune with it, and can receive refreshment from God today and every day. But what if you're not?

In our Gospel story of Zacchaeus we have a man who belongs in that tradition, as a Jew, and yet he doesn't, he's an outcast, cut off from that stream of life. Tax-collectors in most societies are regarded with some suspicion, as people with power able to exploit the weak and poor; but in his time and place, first century Palestine, to be a tax-collector was to be a traitor too, a servant of the pagan unclean occupying forces of Rome. The Gospels speak of 'tax collectors and sinners', and he, we're told, was the arch-tax-collector.

How did he feel about this, being thought of as a corrupter, exploiter, traitor to his people, and his God? Did he have a mezuzah on his doorpost? Probably not, but if he did (perhaps just for show) what would it have said to him, each day, as he went in and out? 'Hear, O Israel....' Not a word of comfort, I think, but a word of challenge. Perhaps he comforted himself by reflecting that he was very rich, and riches were surely a sign of God's blessing – or were they? Had he heard about this new teacher Jesus, and what he said about wealth (reported by St Luke just 20 verses earlier, Lk 18: 25): 'Truly it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God'?

Whatever it was, when Jesus came to Jericho, that man was desperate – running, pushing, losing all dignity to get to Jesus. There's a line in the Book of Proverbs (13: 12) which says 'Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life', and this man, sick at heart, so rich and yet so poor, seems to have taken the 'tree' literally, and climbed up it. Now that, when you think about it, is a very silly thing to do. To be a small man, up a tree, in the middle of a potentially hostile crowd, is a place where you're completely exposed and vulnerable. A place to be lynched. There are many trees in the Bible (to look no further), but if you ever find anyone actually up a tree, they're coming to a sticky end. Think of Absalom, left hanging in the branches while his enemies kill him at their leisure; think of the death of Judas Iscariot; think of the tree set up at Golgotha [2 Sam 18: 9-15; Matt 27: 5, 28; Acts 5: 30; Gal 3: 13 with Deut 21: 23].

But Zacchaeus' urgency to get to Jesus drives him into this place of danger, and it's to his urgency that Jesus responds, with a twinkle, I think: 'Zacchaeus, hurry! Come down! I must stay at your house – *today*'. With an extraordinary twist he finds Jesus inviting himself into his house, into his life.

How important that sense of belonging is, being welcomed, especially when you feel that you don't. Once, when I went to live in a new town and I went to church there for the first time I was wondering (as you do) if people would be friendly, if anyone would talk to me afterwards. So I was standing with a cup of coffee, and an old man came up to me smiling and said: 'The Vicar told us to look out for lots of visitors today – but I can't see any visitors today, can you?' At one I knew that I belonged.

The effect on Zacchaeus is astonishing: after all this anxious striving, running and climbing, suddenly he's standing firm and tall – he seems to have grown to full height – and he's dealing responsibly with his wealth for the sake of the needy, giving half his goods away. And making generous restitution to anyone he's wronged. Like the woman who wept over Jesus' feet, to know he's accepted transforms his grasping into giving: why does he need all these attachments? Living now by compassion for his neighbours, he shows who he is, 'a son of Abraham' like them, a true Jew, back home at last, enfolded in his identity. And what day is it? – 'Today salvation has come to this house' – it is 'today', the day of meeting God, the day when Jesus comes to his house, the day he finds salvation, full life.

The questions remain for us, of course: Who am I? What day is it? We've heard the witness of Jews ancient and modern, from Moses through Zacchaeus to my friend in White Gum Valley. For us the answer will be different, but it will have the same shape.

Who are we? Not Jews by faith, though we stand in the same tradition, worship the same God, share the same scriptures, though we call them 'the Old testament' and add a few hundred pages at the end. But we've come here, today, rather than going to the synagogue yesterday, because, like Zacchaeus, we want to see Jesus, and it's in him that our identity is lodged. Who are we? Baptised children of God, joined to Christ in his death and resurrection through the waters of baptism, which do more than wash us, they make us new. It's that Christ-identity we reaffirm each time we turn to the font to welcome another stranger as our brother or sister, and which we'll reaffirm together at Easter.

So much of that identity is expressed when (like Jews with their *Shema*) we say the Lord's Prayer, daily or weekly, alone or together, entering at Jesus' command into his relationship with God as 'Father'. This is a relationship of love we learn from him, which opens up God's reign in our lives, our world.

And what day is it? The Lord's Prayer reminds us that it's *Today*: 'Give us today our daily bread'. Today is the day we stand before God, like hungry children perhaps, with open hands, ready to receive from God whatever God gives us, which will be for us the bread of life. And we hear the psalmist say 'O that today you would listen to God's voice: harden not your hearts....'

John Dunnill