Deuteronomy through the lens of a missional hermeneutic: An eight week preaching series

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Series title: Radical gratitude and the mission of God

... mission is not primarily about going. Nor is mission primarily about doing anything. Mission is about being. It is about being a distinctive kind of people, a countercultural... community among the nations.¹

Deuteronomy shapes Israel to be a ‘display people’ living in the sight of the nations with faithfulness to God, in obedience to his law, committed to the flourishing of everyone in the community. As Israel lives in obedience to the Lord the nations will exclaim: ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’ (Deuteronomy 4:7). Deuteronomy records the words of God delivered to Israel through his prophet Moses on the brink of entering the land. Here on the brink of the land Israel is faced with a decision: to be faithful or not to be faithful—to worship the one true God or to worship other Gods, abandoning the life of justice and generosity that Yahweh has set out in His law.

Deuteronomy is a deeply complex book, which holds a vision for a covenanted community living under Yahweh’s rule. It doesn’t so much address the individual, as hold out a vision for society—Deuteronomy shows that God, in Christ, stakes claim to every part of culture. It doesn’t merely challenge injustice (though it does that), but brings the whole of human life within the scope of the covenant life. As God's people learn to love Yahweh her God, embracing his life-giving rule in Torah, they will live as kin—family—characterised by thanksgiving, joy, justice and generosity.

This eight sermon series is titled: Radical gratitude and the mission of God. Deuteronomy anticipates that as Israel moves into the land she will be distracted by the abundance of Yahweh’s blessing and forget the Lord her God, upon whom she daily depends. The theme of gift is central, as Gordon Spykman writes:

God's creation is evidence of the caring hand of the Creator reaching out to secure the well-being of His creatures, of a Father extending a universe full of blessings to His children.²

Deuteronomy calls Israel, and in Christ it calls the church, to live with gratitude and generosity in response to God’s good gifts. Within a culture of consumerism and individualism the people of God are called to live as a community of celebration and justice.

Sermon series summary (detailed outline below)

1. Deuteronomy 1:1-33 The roots of the church
   God calls a people, shaping this community though his law, and places them in a blessed land. In the arc of the biblical narrative, this is a kind of return to Eden.

¹ Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, The Message of Mission (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 123.
2. Deuteronomy 4:1-14 A people of God in the sight of the nations

‘...mission is not primarily about going. Nor is mission primarily about doing anything. Mission is about being. It is about being a distinctive kind of people, a countercultural...community among the nations.’ (Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra)

3. Deuteronomy 5:6-21 The Ten Commandments: God’s economics

The commandments shaped Israelite society to be a place where every person could thrive, in contrast to the oppression and exploitation that the nation had experienced in Egypt—in this way Israel was to be a display people before all the world.

4. Deuteronomy Chapter 8: The danger of satiation

Consumerism is a culture of endless accumulation and endless desire. In a consumer culture it is difficult to stop and to be grateful. Gordon McConville writes, ‘Deut. 8 is perhaps the greatest statement of human dependence on God for everything.’

5. Deuteronomy 16:1-17 The festivals: Celebration is the beginning of mission

The church is called to be a community of celebration and generosity in a culture of shallow thrills and isolation.

6. Deuteronomy 24:1-22 ‘The Law is rest’: A contrast community shaped by the law

The laws of the Pentateuch shaped Israel to live rightly with one another and with creation. They shaped Israel to be the kind of people who, in N. T. Wright's words, 'show the rest of humanity what being truly human is all about.'

7. Deuteronomy 29: The covenant curses: 'Many will say to me, “Lord, Lord...”'

We must hold out to our congregations both covenant blessings and covenant curses. Deuteronomy Chapter 29 is a sombre warning to the covenanted community that God will not brook rebellion—should we abandon our mission to be a light to the nations.

8. Deuteronomy Chapter 31: God’s word as an instrument of God’s mission

‘The Scriptures do not only record God's mission through his people to bring salvation to the world; they are also a tool to effectively bring it about...’ (Michael Goheen).

General resources for preaching Deuteronomy missionally:

- Use two commentaries:
  - Gordon McConville, 'Deuteronomy' (Nottingham: Apollos, 2002) [The best commentary on Deuteronomy to date.]
  - Christopher Wright, 'Deuteronomy' (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1996) [Missional focus; 'it preaches'; be sure to read section titled, 'missiological Significance', p. 8-17]
- Davis, Ellen, ‘Scripture, Culture and Agriculture’ (on land gift in the Old Testament)
1. Deuteronomy 1:1-33 The roots of the church

When we speak about the Church as "the people of God in the world" and enquire into the real nature of this Church, we cannot avoid speaking about the roots of the Church which are to be found in the Old Testament idea of Israel as the people of the covenant. So the question of the missionary nature of the Church, that is, the real relationship between the people of God and the world cannot be solved until we have investigated the relation between Israel and the nations of the earth.\(^3\)

Deuteronomy records the words of God delivered to Israel through his prophet Moses on the brink of entering the land. It shapes God’s people to be a people faithful to God, a society in which every person can thrive. Here on the brink of the land Israel is faced with a decision: to be faithful or not.

The ‘big idea’ of this sermon: In God’s plan to restore his good creation, God calls a people, shaping them by Torah, and places them in a blessed land. In biblical context, this is a kind of return to Eden: God is recovering his purposes for his good creation. It also anticipates the renewed creation.

Some key themes are:

- In biblical context, this is a kind of return to Eden: God is recovering his purposes for his good creation. It also anticipates the renewed creation.
- God shapes a people \textit{by his word} to live as a sign to his restorative reign (see talk 8).
- God gives his renewed people a renewed \textit{place} in which to live and thrive: the land. In calling Israel God is not only restoring humanity, he is restoring the whole creation. The ‘land’ is foretaste of the renewal of the whole of God’s good world.
- God arranges for leadership and legal frameworks in anticipation of His giving Torah—so that Torah is kept and that all people might flourish.
- Israel is faced with a moment of decision on the brink of the land at Moab: will Israel be faithful to the Lord and his law? Will she live as God’s people, a renewed humanity?
- Israel is to be a renewed humanity that, in biblical context, both looks back to the goodness of Eden and also anticipates the renewed creation.
- In the scope of the biblical story, in light of Israel’s failure to be this renewed humanity, God sent his ‘Word’, the Son of God. Followers of Christ too are faced with a decision: will we be faithful to our missional call, to be a display people shaped by God’s word? Will we turn from idols to serve the living God?
- Use maps!

Resources:

- Read through Richard Baukham, ‘Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation,’ (unpublished)

2. Deuteronomy 4:1-14 A people of God in the sight of the nations

... mission is not primarily about **going**. Nor is mission primarily about **doing** anything. Mission is about **being**. It is about being a distinctive kind of people, a countercultural... community among the nations.4

Israel is to live as a display people in the sight of the nations. God’s people are to keep His commands and statutes for:

That will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? (Deut 4:7-9)

God is present with his people Israel by his word. God’s word shapes His people in ‘righteousness’, that they may live faithfully under His rule—living for the flourishing of all of humanity, especially the most vulnerable. This kind of society will be magnetic: the nations will come to Yahweh, Israel’s God.

Israel failed at her task and the prophet Isaiah looks forward to God forming His people as a true display of His ‘righteousness’ before the nations (Is 61:10-11). The apostle Paul announces that the ‘righteousness’ of God is revealed in Christ (Rom 3:21-22)—for all who believe! The church of Christ is shaped by God’s word to live as a contrast community before the nations!

Resources

- Extensive notes for preaching the 10 commandments are available on my blog: http://markrglanville.wordpress.com/2012/10/12/the-ten-commandments-gods-economics/

3. Deuteronomy 5:6-21 The Ten Commandments: God’s economics

Traditionally the Ten Commandments have been read for personal piety. In their original context however their concern is broader: the commandments are written in light of the oppression of slavery in Egypt. The commandments shaped Israelite society to be a place where every person could thrive, in contrast to the oppression and exploitation that the nation had experienced in Egypt—in this way Israel was to be a display people before all the world. These laws compel the church to work for a society in which every human being is dignified and has the means to live a full and joyful life as we live as signs to the restorative reign of Christ.

Resources:

- Extensive notes for preaching the 10 commandments are available on my blog: http://markrglanville.wordpress.com/2012/10/12/the-ten-commandments-gods-economics/

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4. Deuteronomy Chapter 8: The danger of satiation

There is perhaps no Biblical text more relevant to western culture than Deuteronomy Chapter 8. Gordon McConville writes, ‘Deut. 8 is perhaps the greatest statement of human dependence on God for everything.’ God has given generously to Israel, ‘a land of wheat and barley, of vine, fig and pomegranate, a land of olive oil and honey.’ And yet with blessing comes temptation: ‘Be careful not to forget the Lord your God... For you might be tempted – when you eat and are satisfied and are living in fine houses you have built.’

Consumerism is a culture of endless accumulation and endless desire. In a consumer culture it is difficult to stop and to be grateful. It is more difficult still to remember that, as Craig Blomberg writes, ‘God owns it all, and He wants everybody to share some of it.’ For Deuteronomy two actions together form a right response to God’s gifts: gratitude and generosity. These themes apply to the Church of Christ too: how can the church reject idols of consumerism and life gratefully and generously?

Leslie Newbigin distinguished between missional intention and missional dimension. Missional intention refers to activities that deliberately seek to witness to those outside of the church. Missional dimension expresses that, since the church is mission, every aspect of the life of the church functions to nourish and embody the mission of Christ—from worship to a posture of celebration (see next talk). Thanksgiving and generosity is a part of the missional dimension of the church. In the words of John Durham, Israel is to be:

... a people set apart, different from all other people by what they are and are becoming—a display people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people.

Resources:


5. Deuteronomy 16:1-17 The festivals: Celebration is the beginning of mission

The church is called to be a community of celebration and generosity in a culture of shallow thrills and isolation. N. T. Wright writes:

This message, by its very nature, can only truly be told by a community that is living by it... living in anticipatory celebration of the new creation in which all wrongs shall be put to rights and every hurt be healed, and making that real in...
public, political, global and economic life as well as in personal and communal holiness.⁹

Consider: how can your community be a centre of celebration and joy in your community? How can your church both experience and offer the celebration of the renewed creation to your streets and suburbs? Deuteronomy 16:1-17 describes the three major feasts in Israel’s calendar. These festivals engage God’s people Israel in a joyful rhythm of harvest and celebration! This three part dynamic is central to Israel’s worldview:

1. God has given generously  
2. His people respond with thanksgiving and rejoicing  
3. Thanksgiving results in generosity, justice and inclusion

Israel’s celebration of God’s good gifts is the basis of her ethic of generosity and welcome and welcome for the ‘stranger’. Seasonal rhythms of festivity and celebration of God’s goodness energise her to bless and welcome others. The passage calls Christ’s church to reject idols of consumerism and accumulation to be a community of gratitude and generosity.

Resources:
- Your notes from this conference workshop
- Walter Harrelson, ‘From Fertility Cult to Worship’
- On welcoming the stranger you might like to read my article: ‘What is a Christian response, or a biblical ethic, regarding refugees?’
  http://markrglanville.wordpress.com/2012/10/01/what-is-a-christian-response-or-a-biblical-ethic-regarding-refugees/


In law is rest  
if you love the law,  
if you enter, singing, into it  
as water in its dissent  
Wendell Berry

Have you ever preached on a list of laws before?! Leslie Newbigin wrote:

Israel was the Lord’s garden, a small oasis of cleanness and beauty in the midst of a world which is a desert of idolatry and the chaos of wickedness. And the hedge which protected this garden, was the Law.

The laws of the Pentateuch shaped Israel to live rightly with one another and with creation. They shaped Israel to be the kind people who, in N. T. Wright’s words, ‘show the rest of humanity what being truly human is all about.’ Certainly they are highly contextualized to ancient Near Eastern culture and language. We might say that these laws were written to ancient Israel, but they are written for us.

These laws are not to be understood individualistically, they express how humanity ought to live in society together. And as John Calvin affirmed, these laws have

implications for the church’s witness within contemporary society—they give a (culturally contextualized) vision for humanity living in community experiencing Yahweh’s ‘shalom’—deep peace.

At the centre of Deuteronomy is a law code (Chapters 12-26). Many scholars consider this to be the rhetorical core of the book. These laws protect vulnerable people and they guard Israel’s faithfulness to the Lord: from marriage laws protecting women, to laws concerning taking pledges to gleaning the field. The point is that God has blessed Israel with abundance and all people are to share in these good gifts.

Make sure you do some hard word exegeting culture! The word ‘strangers’ in Deuteronomy is just as well translated ‘refugee’. The responsibility of western society to offer a welcome ‘strangers’ may be discussed in your sermon.

As your try to understand these laws, lean heavily on Gordon McConville’s commentary. Try to divide preaching time more or less equally between the various laws in this chapter, focussing in your introduction and application on the function of law in shaping the mission of the community.

You will need to do some thinking on how to move hermeneutically from Old Testament law to contemporary church and society. Christopher Wright’s paradigm of ‘function’ and ‘objective’ is helpful (found on p. 13-14 of Wright’s commentary).

Resources
• Make good use of McConville, Gordon, ‘Deuteronomy.’
• Albert Wolters, ‘Creation Regained’, 24ff

7. Deuteronomy 29: The covenant curses: ‘Many will say to me, “Lord, Lord...”

Deuteronomy Chapter 29 reminds pastors that we must hold out to our congregations both covenant blessings and covenant curses. Deuteronomy Chapter 29 is a sombre warning to the covenanted community that God will not brook rebellion. As the church lives out our missional call to the world, we are warned to flee from idols and embrace the comprehensive claim of Christ over our lives—lest the anger of God be ours. For, ‘There are many who say to me, Lord, Lord...’

Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote of the church: ‘They would have to sing better songs for me to learn to have faith in their Redeemer: and his disciples would have to look more redeemed!’ Nietzsche’s words are a wake up call to the western church: are we transformed by Scripture as Deuteronomy calls us to be? The church is immersed in culture and the idols of culture are everywhere. We Christians often strive to be obedient in our personal lives, not realising that the idolatry of our society saturates our lives and churches as well—in many ways we don’t look redeemed.

29:1-9 The text begins with a summary of God’s actions for his people Israel. Christ’s church offers to the world the good news of God’s actions for His creation: that in Christ, his death and resurrection, God is recovering his purposes for His good creation.

29:10-15 The covenant is confirmed. The heart the covenant is relationship: God is our God and we are His people. The inclusivism of the community is a core covenant value, as the text bears out (see Wright’s commentary). What does this mean for your church and for society?
29: 16-21 Idolatry is an outrageous distortion of the truth about the world and God’s goodness. For those who have tasted the grace of God, idolatry attracts God’s anger and judgement. The church is called to name and reject the idols of our culture. An abrogation of this mission means disaster.

29:22-28 Deuteronomy Chapter 4 anticipated that the nations would see the wisdom of Israel’s laws and of her God, as she lived under the life-giving guidance of Yahweh’s words. The opposite is also true: Israel’s disobedience advertises to the nations that rejecting Yahweh and his good direction for life brings futility and judgement. Either way—whether in obedience or disobedience—Israel will display the Lordship of Yahweh. (Bear in mind that this chapter follows a list of both blessings and curses of Chapter 28.)

Consider: What are the implications of the covenant curses for practices of justice in the church today? And consider, what are the implications of the covenant curses for a doctrine of universalism?

Resources
- On judgement see my article: God’s Judgement: An Exclusivist Outrage or the End of Oppression? http://markrglanville.wordpress.com/2012/05/10/gods-judgement-an-exclusivist-outrage-or-the-end-of-oppression/

8. Deuteronomy Chapter 31: God’s word as an instrument of God’s mission

The Scriptures do not only record God’s mission through his people to bring salvation to the world; they are also a tool to effectively bring it about... They don’t only tell us the story of God’s mission but also take an active part in accomplishing his mission... The authority of Scripture must be understood, then, in terms of its place and role in this story. 10

Goheen cites Tom Wright: ‘biblical authority is a “sub-branch” of the mission of the church.’ 11

In Deuteronomy Chapter 31 Moses makes provisions in light of his imminent death. Joshua is chosen as leader and provision is made for the reading and sacred storage of the book of law. The law is to be read before the whole community in the seventh year, at the time of the release of slaves. Chris Wright notes the social effect of this timing: reading the law keeps the community accountable for their practices of social justice. 12 The law is brought to the centre of the life of the community in order that they may be shaped to be a contrast community before the nations. As Duane

11 Ibid.
Christiansen correctly remarks, if it is ever suggested that the Bible nowhere claims divine authority for itself, Deuteronomy shows otherwise!13

Resources:


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