

A better society?

By Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 28th June 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Deuteronomy 15:1-11; Matthew 6:2-4,19-21

What do BBC Radio 4's Rethink series, St Michael's online survey and the Book of Deuteronomy have in common?

They are all about imagining new beginnings:

- Rethink – a series of programmes about what a “new normal” could look like – what we'd like in terms of the environment, the economy, health etc post-Covid
- St Michael's survey – about what worship will look like post-lockdown
- Deuteronomy – what kind of new society for Israel in the Promised Land?

15:1-11 is part of a section on new ways of doing things. The previous few verses (14:22-29) are about the tithe: providing for the institutions of worship first, and then protecting the poor and dependent – the widows, orphans and resident aliens who, in an agricultural society, did not have land on which to grow food. Every third year, instead of bringing the tithe to the central place of worship, it was to be used to replenish foodbanks in each town, where the poor could come and help themselves.

15:1-6 is about the cancellation of debts after 7 years, so that cycles of poverty can be broken and people can have a new start.

15:7-11 is about the attitude of generosity which goes with this – don't be tight-fisted against your neighbour who is in need. Put the needs of others above your desire to hold on to your money – or get it returned from a poor neighbour to whom you've lent it.

Jesus' teaching about almsgiving and our attitude to money assumes that we will give to those in need. We should not lay up treasure on earth, but in heaven.

So what are the implications for our future as a society?

Deut is about putting God's values at the centre of the way society is run.

At the moment, we've seen a big revisiting of the issue of racism in our society, following death of George Floyd. As a culture we are very focussed on human rights as the vehicle for delivering the kind of society we aspire to, where everyone is treated fairly and where the vulnerable are looked after.

When I was reading a commentary on Deut, there was a very telling point made about the philosophy behind the social justice laws in the OT. There is no mention of human rights in the Bible. But there is a big emphasis on social justice.

Instead of focussing on the rights of the individual, the Bible looks at the problem from the other side: the obligations of society, and of all of us, to treat everyone fairly and to care for the poor and vulnerable. You might say it comes to the same thing, but there is a difference in attitude. The focus on rights is based the individual having a right to receive something; the focus on the obligations of society is about an attitude of responsibility and giving to others. In our emphasis on rights, there is a danger that we end up with different rights competing for attention. As footballers take the knee before a football match to agree that Black Lives Matter, an aeroplane flies overhead with a banner saying that White Lives Matter. Instead of an adversarial model, where each group has to fight for its rights, the biblical model is that we all have responsibility for each other. In Deut, this is not a piece of advice – if you want to be particularly nice, you can care for the poor. No, it's a command. If you are tight-fisted to your needy neighbour, he may cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

So what kind of society do we want? Just stimulating the economy and relying on self-interest to generate wealth that can then trickle down to the less well-off, or be handed out to the destitute – that system has led to unsustainable ways of living and economic structures that have devastated the environment and growing disparities between rich and poor. No, we need to put community, and the care of each other and the environment, as well as the fair and equal treatment of people first of all. The bible calls us to a more communitarian way of being, living and running our society.

Now, as we look to life beyond Covid, is the time to think of new ways of doing things. As Christians, let us consider what that means in terms of our attitudes to money, the poor and the environment. We need to start by repenting of our own self-centred attitudes first of all, and then praying for, and advocating for, the values of God's kingdom to be reflected in public policy and the way we do industry and commerce.

If we do this, God promises a blessing (15:10). Let's work with God as a society and in our individual lives. If we seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, all that we need will be given to us (Matthew 6:33).