

The Choice of a New Generation | Deuteronomy

The Sacred Tree, the Death Penalty and the Priests

Deuteronomy 16.21 – 17.13

12.10.17

^{16.20} "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not plant for yourself an Asherah of any kind of tree beside the altar of the LORD your God, which you shall make for yourself. ²² "You shall not set up for yourself a sacred pillar which the LORD your God hates.

^{17.1} "You shall not sacrifice to the LORD your God an ox or a sheep which has a blemish or any defect, for that is a detestable thing to the LORD your God.

² "If there is found in your midst, in any of your towns, which the LORD your God is giving you, a man or a woman who does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, by transgressing His covenant, ³ and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host, which I have not commanded, ⁴ and if it is told you and you have heard of it, then you shall inquire thoroughly. Behold, if it is true and the thing certain that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, ⁵ then you shall bring out that man or that woman who has done this evil deed to your gates, that is, the man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death. ⁶ "On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. ⁷ "The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

⁸ "If any case is too difficult for you to decide, between one kind of homicide or another, between one kind of lawsuit or another, and between one kind of assault or another, being cases of dispute in your courts, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God chooses. ⁹ "So you shall come to the Levitical priest or the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall inquire of them and they will declare to you the verdict in the case. ¹⁰ "You shall do according to the terms of the verdict which they declare to you from that place which the LORD chooses; and you shall be careful to observe according to all that they teach you. ¹¹ "According to the terms of the law which they teach you, and according to the verdict which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the word which they declare to you, to the right or the left. ¹² "The man who acts presumptuously by not listening to the priest who stands there to serve the LORD your God, nor to the judge, that man shall die; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel. ¹³ "Then all the people will hear and be afraid, and will not act presumptuously again.

This is the Season of Advent...when the Church celebrates the Advent or "arrival" of the long-awaited Messiah: the birth of Jesus Christ. SO...you may wonder WHY we're reading this strange passage today..., which seems to have nothing to DO with Advent and was written 1500 years prior to that birth.

Well, this Fifth Book of Moses is about the children of Generation Exodus ("Gen-X") – this is the next generation about to enter the Promised Land and Moses is giving them "Torah" i.e. directions on how to live in the Land as God's unique people who will represent Him and demonstrate to the watching world WHO God is...they will be a reflection on Him.

And IN his instructions, Moses is emphasizing certain institutions and officials that will be necessary for the flourishing of the Israelites especially as they move *from a nomadic life* to an agrarian/farming society. And among those officials, three people or roles repeatedly come up: prophet, priest and king.

Last week we looked at prophet...this week at priest and next week king. All three offices or roles find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ... whose Advent or arrival we are celebrating... I hope you see the link.

Today, we consider the role of the ancient priest or "Levitical priest" (v.9). Among other things, they served as a *court of appeal* in the judicial process of ancient Israel. They were where you went to settle very thorny disputes that couldn't be settled among neighbors or even by a local court... If a dispute was very complicated and couldn't be resolved...the priest would apply the Law and settle the conflict...and ALWAYS there would have to be JUSTICE...

Justice is important to us...justice for victims of sexual abuse and misuse of power... "with liberty and justice for ALL" – where did we get that idea...and *how are we doing* as a society and church with justice for ALL and other aspects of JUSTICE?

Today, we'll consider that 1) God IS JUST 2) God DEMANDS justice and 3) God will DELIVER justice.

This passage is really kicked off by v. 20 (which we sadly left out of the bulletin) "Justice and ONLY justice you shall pursue."

That's the theme... God is just and He wants His people to reflect to the watching world THAT aspect of His character. "Justice and righteousness are the foundation of His throne." (Ps 89 and 97). Those two Hebrew words, "mishpat" and "tsedeq" ("Justice and righteousness") are almost synonymous and they appear hundreds of times and as a pair over 50 times in the Hebrew Bible. God is right and just.

And God has demonstrated to His people that HE is this way. He showed this aspect of His character to Abraham (when God found Sodom and Gomorrah overrun with sexual violence) and Abraham GOT IT...and then he asked God that famous question, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (he used the two words – tsedeq and mishpat).

It comes up again in the Exodus, when God saw the oppression of the weak by the strong. God's own people treated unjustly... and God intervened to bring justice and to right the wrong and Pharaoh confesses, "I have sinned this time; the LORD is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones." (Ex. 9.27)

And over and over at Sinai (for the Exodus Generation) and in Deuteronomy (as we've seen) the God of Abraham is saying, "I am the Unique and Righteous Judge...this is WHO I AM... I can't be bribed or manipulated like the idols...I am right and just."

And that's WHY this passage, on the theme of justice and introduced with words (we didn't print – ugh!) the passage begins with "Justice and only justice YOU SHALL PURSUE..." and then it forbids the use of sacred trees and fertility symbols... because THESE are techniques and mechanisms and gadgets for manipulating the powers (just like we saw last week with that listing of 10 occult practices all aimed at bribing and coercing the powers). The God of Abraham, the righteous Judge of all the earth...will NEVER be bribed... will never show favoritism because His very NATURE is JUST.

Therefore, before He tells this NEXT generation to be just... He reminds them that HE IS JUST. "You can't mix in a little karma...a little magic... a fertility symbol to sort of entice/seduce Me or give Me something I NEED... the gods of the nations have needs... I NEED NOTHING," says YHWH, "and that's why I can never be bribed/coerced/bought – I'm just."

"And I want you to remember that I don't NEED your offerings... or sacrifices... and when you make an offering... it can not have a defect...it can not be what the Egyptians and Canaanites offer...YOUR WORSHIP WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT I AM HOLY...totally unique...don't offer 'seconds' (defective animals) because that FORGETS WHO I AM."

And after driving that home... Moses gives two examples in two paragraphs almost the same length. Each paragraph starts with an "If/Then" conditional clause...and ends with a purpose statement, "you shall purge the evil from your midst..." (7 and 12).

The first example is of an Israelite who decides to revert to the karma-system and who insists on controlling the powers using statues...or idols.

When you settle in the Land God gives you (and notice that repeated reference to GRACE – "the Lord GIVES you" ... some 35 times in Deuteronomy) if there's a report in any one of your towns of someone who worships idols... THIS IS EQUIVALENT to spiritual adultery... and it's deadly serious!"

"BUT...I will NOT allow you to judge based on rumors and hearsay and circumstantial evidence. There must be certainty... at least two or three eyewitnesses... YOU MUST BEAR the burden of proof because THIS is a capital crime..." (more on that in a moment).

The second paragraph has to do with a dispute between neighbors. It's a conflict that may involve violence. *And you may not be able to discern* whether there was premeditation or even intent.

It may be hopelessly complicated and nuanced and too difficult to decide... So, there will be an appellate court. You take the parties in the lawsuit to the Tabernacle (the place of worship) and the Levitical priest will hear the case and apply the standard of Law to the case (lit. "the mouth of Torah" i.e. "the priest will make the Law speak to this case").

This is like the Supreme Court and the way of settling very complex disputes with justice. AND if someone is too arrogant ("presumptuous") to abide by the court's decision... that person will face the death penalty.

Now: a few observations. First, this is pretty cool. I mean this strikes me as a very developed judicial system. I know we have some legal professionals in our congregation and all I ever learned about law and order...I learned by watching "Law and Order" (and John Grisham novels/movies)... but I do recognize that IN THIS ANCIENT situation, the basic rudiments of justice that are found in our own system of law and order...were put in place.

Rules about witnesses, evidence, appeals, burden of proof, impartiality, intent, classification of crimes into degrees, the authority of the judiciary, the binding nature of verdicts...all these elements are present. WHY? Because God is JUST and He wants His character accurately represented in the social life of His people.

Second... the death penalty. That strikes me as...not so cool...in fact you may find it troubling...but...the goal (twice repeated) was to purge evil from Israel.

And what we don't want to see is that evil is like a contagion. And if a limb is gangrenous...has gangrene or necrosis (where living tissue has died...and infection sets in) it's never pleasant but it simply has to be done to save the organism. Sometimes ONLY amputation can save the body.

And these two cases (even though WE may not think they're serious), they ARE indeed so egregious and serious... that they require a kind of amputation.

The first is spiritual adultery (note the word "covenant" in v.2) and it opens the door to that kind of full blown spiritual evil (as we saw last week) that eventually becomes child-sacrifice. And it had to be carried out by the one who had discovered it: "the hand of the witnesses shall be first" to throw the stone and then everyone else. It wasn't taken lightly.

The second is the lynchpin of the whole system of justice. If the Levitical priest in office could be arrogantly disregarded by anyone who didn't like the verdict then there WAS no justice – NO authority = NO justice.

And you might be thinking... "In that ancient world, a very violent world (Gen 4.23ff) where God established this well-ordered system of fairness...which was so foreign to the Canaanites and their revenge culture... how did it go?"

Well...in like two short generations...the Israelites had basically forgotten God...forgotten that He was just and right and had begun a descent into a time when everyone "did what was right in his own eyes".

But the dream...and even a glimpse of true justice and protection for the weak and oppressed...a way of life there really would be "liberty and justice for all"...that glimpse never died. In fact God would over and over PROMISE a Priest...a Judge...who would be able to decide even the most complicated cases.

The Prophet Isaiah would say of this One righteous and just Priest: "He will delight in the fear of the LORD, and He will not judge (only) by what is visible, nor make a decision only by what is audible ; but with righteousness He will judge for the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth" (Isa 11.3-4).

Here's a Priest...a Judge who could look right into the intentions and motives...and would ALWAYS decide rightly and equitably...who would delight in the fear of the LORD...be totally in sync with the heart of God.

And THAT brings us to Advent. When (in the fullness of time – Gal 4.4) this sympathetic High Priest came and was born poor...born in a parking garage/barn... Then when He was twelve years old, He converses with the priests in the temple and they could tell that He was special...unblemished...pure in heart.

Later...as a grown Man...He was acknowledged as a Rabbi (an interpreter of Torah)...and He was in the Temple teaching and they had this very thorny messy case...a woman was found sinning...and the clergymen appealed to this Rabbi, "they said to Him, 'Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now, in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do YOU say?'"

They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

I don't know what (if anything) He was writing in the dust of the Temple that day... But I do know that Jesus Christ quoted this very passage from today's sermon. If YOU are the witnesses to the adultery then YOU throw the first stone...and then He alters it to say, "Uh...that IS, if YOU are without sin yourself."

I think He was saying, "Hey, you guys haven't done real well administering justice... I don't think YOU want justice...DO you?" (Maybe He wrote nothing...just gave them time to think).

And as the Lord's own brother, James would later say, *"For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment"*. (James 2.13)

"Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard what He'd said, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. Straightening up, Jesus said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.'" (John 8.4-11)

So what: was Jesus Christ just soft on sin? No. He clearly told her – "don't do this anymore."

And for Him...it wasn't a choice: EITHER justice OR mercy. For Him...only justice could loose mercy on the world.

He freed her from the death penalty because He would be bound by it...He would die in her place, in my place. He would be cut off so she could be included.

In Jesus Christ, the sympathetic High Priest, the words of Psalm 85 come to pass "Grace and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other". It can't be an either/or!

He doesn't disregard justice; a price has to be paid; a death-penalty has to be paid. In Jesus Christ, God can be both just and merciful, "that God would be (both) just AND the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus". (Rom 3.26).

Look: if you want mercy...come to Jesus Christ today.

If you long for a world where there's equity and the weak are defended...come to Jesus Christ today.

Coming to Him will make you want to work for justice and mercy even in the "here and now" because you know the day is coming when all wrongs will be made right.

To NOT come to Jesus Christ is to act presumptuously (arrogantly) in the extreme...there's NO remedy for staying away from Him...only a fearful anticipation of judgment...

But why stay away? Why face eternal judgment for what YOU deserve...when the unblemished Lamb of God...the Priest who is ALSO the sacrifice...the Risen Savior offers you what He deserves...the right to call God your Father...to be forgiven/defended? Receive.