

Deuteronomy 8.7-18

There are sins that you set out to commit, and there are sins you fall into because you did nothing. If I buy six bottles of claret instead of a birthday present for my wife, that is a *sin of commission*. I did the wrong thing. If I drink two bottle of claret and forget what day it is, and never say ‘Happy Birthday’, that is a *sin of omission*. I failed to do the thing I should have done. I commit too many sins of omission, especially when it comes to putting dates in my diary. That is why, last weekend, we had to visit three cathedrals. I knew I had to be here to say ‘God go with you’ to Bishop Mike, on Saturday, and I knew I had to preach at 10.30 on Sunday morning, in Coventry. The sin of omission was the failure to note the installation of a good friend, as a canon of another cathedral, at evensong, on Sunday. I tried to laugh that off. I told Mrs Hoyle about 2 Kings 9:20, *It looks like the driving of Jehu son of Nimshi; for he drives like a maniac*. Mrs Hoyle did not laugh. She did not laugh on the way to Norwich, she did not laugh on the way back.

Coventry’s new cathedral was consecrated in 1962. There are people who can still remember what the architect said; they will explain the design, the vision that they had and still have. In Coventry it is still 1962. Norwich was built in 1096 and no one remembers the architect. So, at an older cathedral, they can be more relaxed about changing things. Cathedrals, you see, are different from one another. Another of the differences is that cathedrals are richer, or poorer. Coventry is not a rich cathedral, Norwich certainly is. You can sense there is money at Norwich; if a minor canon stood still for too long, she would be covered in gold leaf.

If you are a Dean, you think about these things. I think about them a lot. In fact, I may have thought about them too much. I talked to our ordinands in July, at the end of their placement. They asked me why I keep mentioning the lack of resources here. They made me realise I was slipping into a bad habit. I had gone down to Egypt; I was stuck there. And that is a temptation for us all.

Let me explain. We have just heard a reading, from Deuteronomy... *the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land*. Deuteronomy tells us about the promise God makes that he will bring his people to

a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing,

Leaving Egypt, they will come, at last, to a land flowing with milk and honey. That, however, is the climax of the story, milk and honey comes at the end. The story starts badly. There is a famine in Egypt, the seven years of famine that Joseph dreamt about. To manage that dearth, Joseph stores grain in good years and sells it in the lean years. Little-by-little, the people are turned into slaves

All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them... Genesis 47:20-21

There is grain in Egypt, it is in Joseph’s barns, but it is controlled. Note that, there is actually enough to go round, but the story is all about *austerity*. It is a story that really takes hold. The Israelites are oppressed. When they complain, their conditions are made worse. They are given no straw to make bricks, yet they must still make the same number of bricks.

The taskmasters were urgent, saying, "Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw." Exodus 5:13

More austerity, scarcity, no straw to make bricks. So, the people groan under their burden. The Lord hears them and we hear the promises of redemption.

I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites... I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Exodus 6:5-8

God announces the end of austerity: freedom, land, milk and honey. In our reading, from Deuteronomy, the people are poised on the brink of the Promised Land and Moses rehearses the promises of God, *a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing,*

This is not just one story among many in the Old Testament. This is the controlling story; the story the faithful keep telling. It gives us Passover. When the Jews began to feel their way towards a creed, they made this story an article of faith,

...the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Deuteronomy 26:7-9

This is a sustained rejection of the story about austerity. Austerity is *not* the story. Austerity is the way you keep a people anxious and enslaved. God does not promise austerity. God promises abundance.

Now, at our harvest festival, we get a glimpse of abundance. We see plenty suddenly and we give thanks. That is a very good thing to do. Hurrah for harvest. Hurrah for gratitude. Our trouble is that tomorrow it will be back to austerity, council cuts, the Brexit fears of the economy, public borrowing, pay caps and more. Harvest is a very short season and tomorrow we will return to the Egypt story. Back to Egypt and that story in which power presses its advantage and push us towards austerity. Back to scarcity, anxiety and slavery. We know about freedom, generosity and the abundance of God, but we tend to stick to the old script. I talk about the challenge of limited resources. Enough is rarely enough; we all want more. If only I had a bit more time, a bit more money, a bit more help it would all be OK. We grind out the old tune, the one about austerity and scarcity.

This is serious stuff. Let's try looking at it another way. Once upon a time, in a tower, in a city there lived a sad little man. Let's call him *Dean* and he had too much to do. 'O woe is me', said Dean, 'for I have too much to do. I have to mend a window, and go to a three meetings, and read the accounts and there are chairs to move, there are services to take and bills to pay and the organ is broken'. And Dean cried into his silk hankie. Now people heard Dean crying, in his tower, and they came and they helped him. One of them mended the window, one went to the meeting and another moved all the chairs, and many more things besides. Then later a very important person, we will call him *Mr Bishop*, came to Dean and said 'Are you doing well'. And Dean stuck his thumbs in his waistcoat and said 'We have had a review and indeed I have done many things very well. I have mended a window, and been to nine meetings and I have moved many chairs. And Mr Bishop was pleased and so was Dean.

You see, our problem is the way we tell our stories. It is the problem Deuteronomy identifies. Deuteronomy sounds out a warning, *Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God.* What Deuteronomy notices is that either we worry that God will not save us, or we stop talking about God and start talking about ourselves instead. We either talk about scarcity, or we get smug.

Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." But remember the LORD your God

Part of what I am saying is that we need to think about the story we tell. Is it right for us to talk about scarcity and austerity when we have so much? Have we noticed what we have been given? Deuteronomy though makes a bigger point, *remember the LORD your God* it says, *remember the LORD your God.*

The problem with Dean, tearful in his tower, is that all he can think about is Dean. Dean is the only story that Dean knows. And in that story Dean is either, not doing very well and talking about austerity, or he is pleased with himself. It is either all about what Dean cannot do, or all about what he has done. He has not remembered the Lord his God.

The point about coming here and doing this, the point about church, is that we tell another a story and it is not all about us. We are not here because we believe in ourselves and have that story to tell, we are here because we believe in God. We may not be quite sure how much we believe and or how well we believe, but oddly that does not signify, because it is not about how well we are doing. We are here to look away from ourselves to a God who holds all our stories in his hands and never lets them go. And when you remember that, well, that is when you finally begin to stop worrying about having too little, or being pleased that you have accumulated a lot.

It is why and what we believe; because without God there is no story, no beginning, no end, no meaning. It is what we believe, that there is a story about love and life, story told about us, not by us. A story in which there is no shortage of love, no failure of life. It really is time to leave Egypt behind.