

Deuteronomy 4 sermon – Tregear 15.5.2022

If you were here two weeks ago, you'll remember that in Deuteronomy we're looking at three **final speeches from Moses**, Israel's great leader. They've been wandering around the desert for 40 years, they're on the **east side of the Jordan river**. And they're **ready to cross**. And maybe **this time...** take the land. Israel is **standing on the edge of the promised land**. And they have a choice to make, between their **true God... who speaks but has no visible shape**. Or the **idols**, who can be seen, but **do not speak**. The God who is **heard but not seen**. Or domesticated, well behaved and convenient idols, who are **seen... but not heard**.

As we start the chapter, and Moses' sermon, it begins, *Now Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you*. As you hear this you may be thinking O, this is just a whole heap of do's and don'ts, which is often the way we think of laws isn't it? But the Hebrew word *Torah*, more accurately means "instruction" or "guidance" or "counsel" – these words have more positive connotations. What God is doing here is to provide guidance for his people so that they might enjoy his blessing in the land he is graciously giving them.

As Moses says in v.7 - no other nation around has a God who is near to them; no other nation has a body of laws like this to guide you. God is wanting his people to remain as a light to the nations around them. These laws will guide them so that the nations around will say as in v.6 – *"Surely this nation is a wise and understanding people."* And so other nations will want to look at the one true god. And the word that keeps cropping up throughout this chapter but also all Deuteronomy – **don't forget**. **v.9** - the things you have seen, the things God has done and also don't let them fade from your heart. Keep them bubbling in your memory. Teach your

children. Why? Because we so easily forget. We so easily get distracted away by other things we can see.

And then v.10 – this was a defining moment for the Israelite people. Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when he said to me, "Assemble the people before me to **hear my words** so that they may learn to **revere me** as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children." God said, **assemble the people, to hear my words. So they'll revere me. So they'll hold me in honour.**

And so Moses says in verse 11... that's what you did. You stood there, **while the Lord spoke**. And remember the picture we had?.. Clouds of black smoke, and deep darkness and **blazing fire**. And in the midst of it all a **booming voice of God himself**. The **speaking God. Stand in awe!**

But notice, in spite of the smoke, in spite of the fire, when it comes to God himself, there's **nothing to see**. This is the God who is **heard but not seen**. You heard the **sound of words** but **saw no form**; there was **only a voice**. v.13 - He **declared to you his covenant**, the Ten Commandments, which he **commanded you to follow** and then wrote them on two stone tablets. For Israel, this is the moment they must remember. Their **defining** moment. But **nothing to see**. You heard the **sound of words**. But **saw no visible form**. And for Israel this will be a constant battle for them, for their hearts. The constant **temptation** to have a **tangible, visible god**, like everyone else. Why can't **we have a god we can see?**

What are the gods that attract us? We may not go for a wooden idol but we are constantly getting bombarded with voices aren't we? You need this house, or this insurance policy to make your life secure...there are others saying to us it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe it; it's your choice. An idol is

basically anything that rivals God – anything to which we submit and which we serve in place of God himself. Wood and stone are not bad things; but when we pervert their function and treat them as ultimate beings on which our well-being and future depends, when we put our hope in them – that makes them an idol. Tim Keller has identified Money, Sex and Power as idols today for us. However, it may also be true of our spouses, our children, our hobbies, sport, desire for entertainment. Anything that robs God of the exclusive worship he deserves.

And so **Israel's going to have a choice** to make. Every day they live in the land. Every day of their lives. No matter how young, no matter how old. The nations around them have lots of gods; it's tempting to make a god you can see. Which is the point Moses goes on to make more strongly in verse 15. *You saw **no form of any kind** the day the Lord **spoke** to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore **watch yourselves very carefully**, so that you do not become corrupt and **make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape**. **God has come to you in his word**. So **honour that**, instead of making **idols** and **bowing down to them**.*

See it's interesting, in the creation account in Genesis 1:26, God has made **man** as his **image and likeness**. And he's made **man** to **rule** over the **animals of the earth** and the **birds in the air** and the **fish of the sea**. And now **idolatry** turns everything exactly upside down. And instead of **worshipping the creator**, and **ruling over** the animals of the earth and the birds in the air... people by nature do the **exact reverse**. And they **create for themselves** an **image** of an **animal**. They carve themselves a **fish**. And they **bow down to that**. We may not create an image but what do we go to each day – the TV, sport, social media. Moses says, "**Watch yourselves very carefully**," verse 16, *so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an **image of any shape** whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any*

creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below. And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars - all the heavenly array - do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the Lord your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.

It might be **tempting to bow down to things you can see**, like everyone else does. But the point is, the Lord **your God** has **made that stuff**. And not only that, he's **spoken**. To **you**. He's brought you out of **Egypt**, and he's **made himself known**. And he's **very particular...** about **whether or not you take notice of him**.

So God is saying to the people, through Moses, "Don't forget, don't forget, don't forget". v.20 – you're the people of his inheritance, that is, to be God's people.

v.22 – don't forget the covenant that God has made with you. It might be **tempting to bow down to things you can see**, like everyone else does. But the point is, the Lord **your God** has **made that stuff**. And not only that, he's **spoken**. To **you**. He's brought you out of **Egypt**, and he's **made himself known**.

And now come some very strong words of warning. Moses says to them, it's as simple as this. Here's your choice. **Turn to idols**, and you'll be **thrown out of the land**. v.27 - Turn to idols, and you'll be **smashed**. And **scattered**. Turn to idols, and you'll **end up with exactly what you're asking for**. And instead of being God's **special people** in God's **promised land...** you'll live among the nations and you'll **be exactly like them**. And you'll **worship what they worship**. Verse 28: "*There you will worship man made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell.*" Gods that **you can see**. But certainly can't see you. Or hear you, **or speak to you**. In v.24 God is described as a *consuming fire, a jealous God*. As you read this it seems pretty harsh doesn't it? I thought God was a loving God. One

writer has described it like this: “The fire of Yahweh as a jealous God is the fire of an exclusive commitment to this people that demands an exclusive commitment in return.” I couldn’t help think about my footy team, the Panthers. Each week, especially last night, every team member was expected to put their body on the line for the team. They are exclusively committed to their team to give it everything. God’s commitment to us is greater than any footy team member. God will tolerate no rivals – he demands exclusive commitment. We expect it from our footy team. How much more is it right that our God who has given everything for us, expects it from us. And boy that’s a challenge for me, easy-going, don’t go too hard Dave. But you’re saying I thought God loves us. Here’s the other side of the coin in v.31 – “For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors.” It seems like a contradiction; but it’s in fact an important consistency. The same jealousy that God has for his people is there protecting and undergirding his mercy and covenant faithfulness to his people. When they rebel and worship idols the people would find the God of v.24. But when they return to God and obey God they would find the God of v.31. God hasn’t changed, **but he responds to his people as they change.** We’re the ones who change. God is faithful.

Verse 32, Moses says as you stand here and look across the Jordan at your **promised land, consider your incredible privilege.** He says, there's been **nothing like this** since the **very beginning.** Has anything **so great as this ever happened,** or anything like it ever been **heard of?** Verse 33, "Has any other people **heard the voice of God speaking out of fire,** as you have, and lived?" Has **any god,** has **any idol** taken a nation for himself out of another nation, has **any idol** done the **awesome things the Lord did for you...** as he brought you out of **Egypt?**

Here's the point. Here's what Israel needs to know. That the **Lord their God** is the **only God**. And he's **spoken to them**. To **discipline them**. Because **they are his people**.

Get the impact of this. Because it's **incredibly politically incorrect** that Israel's God, the **God who has spoken...** is not just **one choice** on the **god menu**. One selection from the smorgasbord of gods and you can **choose one you like**. You don't **carve your own god in your own image to do what you want him to**.

verse 39. "Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the **Lord is God** in heaven above and on the earth below. **there is no other**. And so... **keep his decrees and commands**. So you and your children will be **blessed**. And live **long in the land** that the Lord your God is giving you."

See, the **speaking God...** is the **only God**. Which in our multicultural, multi-faith world, it's just **not the thing people say**, is it? It goes right against many in our society who say, You've got to be tolerant, you've got to be inclusive. When you're a tourist looking up at the **giant golden Buddha** in Japan, or the **giant golden Krishna** in Kuala Lumpur; when you see whole **cultures** devoted to that stuff, the **speaking God** says, the **one true God** says, they're just stuff you can buy from the **hardware store, just go to Bunnings and buy some wood**. And they **can't help you at all**. Of course, the idols we have today in Australia maybe a little bit more **subtle**. But ultimately they are things which draw our hearts away from the **God who has spoken**.

I want to take a moment thinking forward to where **we are**. And ask the question **how has the speaking God spoken to us?** And how do we respond? You might be inclined to say, well, I haven't **seen a fire** on a mountain,

or **heard any voices**. Well, the fact is, the New Testament wants to tell us that God has both **been heard** and been **seen ...** in the **person of Jesus**. And so **we ... listen to him**.

We see this wonderfully in John's gospel. And especially in chapter 1. Because God is the **God of Word**. There's something **deeply philosophical** going on here that I can never quite **get my head around**. But John chapter 1 verse 1 says ***in the beginning was the word***.

This is the **speaking God**. This is the God who **spoke creation into being with a word**. This is the God who **spoke a nation into being...** with a **promise to Abraham**. This is the God who **spoke his laws to Moses...** for **life in the promised land**.

*"In the beginning was the Word," John 1 verse 1, "and the Word was **with** God, and the Word **was** God. He was with God in the beginning."*

And then in John chapter 1 verse 14, we have the **stunning words**. *"The Word **became flesh...** and made his dwelling among us."* **The invisible god...** is now **visible. Can now be seen**. Not as an **idol**. But in the person of **his son**. And so now, **"we have... seen his glory... the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."**

And to verse 18. *"No one has ever **seen God...** but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, **has made him known.**"* In other words, **the closest** you can ever get to **seeing the formless God...** is in **the word became flesh**. Jesus Christ. The **best you can ever know God...** is in **Jesus Christ**. The **word became flesh**.

And so the God who was **heard but not seen** has now been both **seen and heard**. In the person of his **son**. So knowing God is about **listening to Jesus, the Word**. If Jesus is God's **word became flesh**, and if we're meant to **listen to him**, it means **soaking up his every word**. It means **watching what's reported of his every action**.

So in the same way that Moses spoke to the people: listen to God's law, never forget, keep the commands; so Jesus says to us, listen to me, don't forget, keep my commands.

And one more thing. **Take it to heart**. The laws **God spoke to Israel**, the reason **he spoke...** it wasn't just to **change their behaviour on the outside**. It wasn't just to **fill their heads** with knowledge. It was to **shape their hearts**. Shape their hearts to love God above everything else. There's no point **learning about the Lord Jesus...** if you're never going to **take it to heart**. Remember it's all about relationship. God has made himself known to us not so that we might **know lots of stuff**. But that we might **know him**, that we might **love him**.

That's the challenge facing **Israel** on the edge of the promised land.

There's **one more river to cross**, and that's the **river of Jordan**. But if they're not going to **listen to the speaking God** and **take his words to heart**, they're really **not getting anywhere**. And neither are we.

How we respond to Jesus, to the God who has come down to earth and shown himself and spoken to us and continues to speak to us, is going to shape our lives now and our whole eternity.