

DIOCESE OF CHICHESTER

TO KNOW · LOVE · FOLLOW JESUS



YEAR OF THE BIBLE 2017

Hear the Word of the Lord

A Lent course for the Diocese of Chichester's
Year of the Bible

Session 2 – The Torah

written by James Dunn and Mark Gilbert
and edited by Rebecca Swyer

Session introduction (5 minutes)

This will be the second time your group has met together so a recap of who's who might be worthwhile.

Suggested opening prayers (10 minutes)

Prayers and psalms can either be said 'responsorially' (i.e. a leader leads and others respond), or 'antiphonally' (i.e. two groups of voices, each saying alternate verses). One way of splitting a group is by birth month – Jan-Jun and Jul-Dec. Music / hymn / song suggestions are made, but whether or not to include them, accompanied or not, and at which stage, is entirely up to you.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.
and also with you.

Your word is a lantern to our feet
and a light upon our path.

Blessed are you, Lord our God.
How sweet are your words to the taste,
sweeter than honey to the mouth.

How precious are your commands for our life,
more than the finest gold in our hands.

How marvellous is your will for the world,
unending is your love for the nations.

Our voices shall sing of your promises
and our lips declare your praise.

Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God for ever.

Psalm 1 (this translation is from the Common Worship psalter):

Blessed are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the assembly of the scornful.

Their delight is in the law of the Lord
and they meditate on his law day and night.

Like a tree planted by streams of water
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither,
whatever they do, it shall prosper.

As for the wicked, it is not so with them;
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.

Therefore the wicked shall not be able to stand in the judgement,
nor the sinner in the congregation of the righteous.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked shall perish.

**Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

A prayer

Almighty God,
we thank you for the gift of your holy word.
May it be a lantern to our feet,
a light upon our paths,
and a strength to our lives.
Take us and use us

to love and serve all people
in the power of the Holy Spirit
and in the name of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Hymn/song suggestions: The God of Abraham Praise (selected verses) / Faithful One, so unchanging

Professor Dunn's introduction (10 minutes)

Torah is the Jewish name for the law of Moses, that is, the first five books of the Jewish Bible, also known as the Pentateuch. They are traditionally attributed to Moses, who led the tribes of Israel from enslavement in Egypt to establish a new nation, Israel. Scholarship has reckoned that, historically, behind the Pentateuch lie four written sources – two which knew Israel's God as Jahweh or as Elohim, a third more or less identical with Deuteronomy, and the fourth attributed to a priestly revision – in scholarly shorthand known as J, E, D and P.

The first of the five, **Genesis**, as the name suggests, covers the period of beginnings. First, of course, is creation itself. Intriguingly there are two creation stories, the former the familiar six-day creation followed by the seventh as a Sabbath rest. In this account male and female are created together, presumably both or together bearing the image of God (Gen. 1.27). In the second, man is created first (2.7) and woman is created only subsequently (2.21-22). The fall from God's favour is linked to knowledge of good and evil (3.5, 22), and the implied liberty to choose either.

Sketchy stories follow (particularly Cain and Abel, and Noah – Gen.4-11). But the history really begins with Abraham and his commission to become a great nation, a blessing to others (12.1-3). Most notably, God makes a covenant with Abraham and his offspring, including the promise of the land of Canaan. The seal of the covenant was circumcision of all his male descendants (17.1-14). Genesis continues with the story of the patriarchs – Abraham's son Isaac (26-28), Isaac's son Jacob (28-37), renamed as Israel (32.28), and Jacob's son Joseph (37-50). Joseph's success in Egypt results in his brothers all settling in Egypt.

The second book of the Pentateuch is appropriately named as **Exodus**. It tells the story of how the descendants of Israel, who had been enslaved by the Egyptians, were delivered from Egypt, under the leadership of Moses and his brother Aaron. The Egyptian Pharaoh is 'persuaded' to free the Israelites by a series of plagues (Exodus 9-12), the climax also marked by the establishment of the feast of the Passover (13) and the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (14). The centre and climax is the giving of the law to Moses, beginning with the Ten Commandments (20) and climaxing with the making and furnishing of the tabernacle (26-40).

The third book, **Leviticus**, provides instruction on how the tabernacle cult should operate – instructions on the laws of sacrifice (Lev. 1-7), the institution of the priesthood (8-10), uncleanness and its treatment (11-15), the day of atonement (16), and the holiness code (17-26). The language of 'clean'/'unclean' is more prominent in Leviticus than in any other OT book.

Numbers begins by numbering the people – more than 600,000 males. Significantly the Levites are exempted from military service and dedicated to the service of the tabernacle. Moses appoints 70 elders to assist him. The 'murmuring' of the people against Moses' leadership is a prominent feature. The main story is the failure of the spies to give a positive report of the (promised) land of Canaan, with only Caleb and Joshua reporting favourably. The consequence is that the people wander for 40 years in the wilderness. The book ends with the Israelites on the edge of Canaan, dividing the land among them.

Deuteronomy (literally 'second law') consists of three speeches delivered by Moses shortly before the Israelites enter the promised land. The first recalls the forty years of wilderness wanderings and ends with an exhortation to observe the law (Deut. 1-11). The second reminds the Israelites of the need for monotheism and observance of the laws he has given them (12-28). And the third offers encouragement that should Israel prove unfaithful, and so lose the land, with repentance all can be restored (29-30).

About the author of this reflection:

James D. G. "Jimmy" Dunn FBA was for many years the Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in the Department of Theology at the University of Durham. He is a Church of Scotland minister and a Methodist local preacher.

Group discussion (15 minutes)

1. What value are the stories of the Creation and the Fall in the light of our modern understanding of the Big Bang and Evolution?
2. Many people experiencing injustice and oppression have identified with the Exodus story. Why is that?

Bible passage (5 minutes)

The Great Commandment

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.

Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,

and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates

Deuteronomy 6 1-9

‘Lectio Divina’ can be an effective form for group use. After a passage is read, there can be some extended silence for each person to savour what he or she has heard, particularly noting whether any word or phrase became a special focus of attention. Sometimes groups invite members, if they so desire, to share out loud the word or phrase that struck them. This is done without discussion. Then a different person from the group would read the passage again with a pause for silence. Different emphases might be suggested after each reading: What gift does this passage lead me to ask from the Lord? What does this passage call me to do?

Whether one prays individually or in a group, ‘Lectio Divina’ is a flexible and easy way to pray. One first listens, notes what is given and responds in a way one is directed by the Holy Spirit.

Mark Gilbert’s reflection (10 minutes)

The first 5 books of the Bible are known as The Torah (the Law). For the Jewish religion, it is the most important part of the OT and every synagogue has The Torah scrolls. When I was six we moved to Cheetham Hill in Manchester which was at the time a very Jewish area, a bit of culture shock for me coming from rural Lancashire. You could see how seriously they took their religion, particularly on The Sabbath, with many orthodox Jews on the streets with large hats and long beards.

It was also the custom to wear ‘phylacteries’. These are mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 23:5 when he condemns the Scribes and Pharisees who wear large phylacteries and long tassels to show off their piety whilst making the Law a burden for most ordinary people. A phylactery is a small leather box which holds a verse of scripture and is strapped on the upper arm or on the forehead. The Torah commands that they should be worn as a "sign" and "remembrance" that God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt. The verses in these small boxes are Exodus 13 1-10, Exodus 13 11-16, Deuteronomy 11: 13-21 and this passage we have just read Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Imagine wearing a phylactery strapped to your forehead. Imagine those words in that box on your forehead being imprinted in your mind that go into the very core of our being.

The very heart of "The Torah" is God's revelation to Moses and the giving of The Law. If you could boil the Law down to one verse it would be this one.

About the author of this reflection:

Canon Mark Gilbert is Priest In Charge of Petworth in West Sussex . He is also Rural Dean of Petworth Deanery and Chair of the House of Clergy in our diocesan synod .

We see this reflected in the Gospel of Luke 10 v25 as the Lawyer quotes from this passage from Deuteronomy.

'Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." '

Jesus responds to the lawyer by turning to the Scriptures "What is written in the law?" The lawyer responds with the verse from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus 18v18

"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord."

You can see how important the Torah is to Jesus. In Matthew 5 he tells us that he has not come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it. Not one, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

The heart of The Law is Love: to love God and your neighbour. We don't wear Phylacteries to remind us to put God first in our lives. Yet at our baptism we were marked with another sign. The sign of the cross which although invisible to others is not invisible to God it marks us as his own. In 1 John 4 1-21 we see that it not that we love God but that he loves us and is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. In other words, we are loved by God first. and we can see this because he sent his Son who shows us how much he loves us by dying for us on the cross where he shows the depth of his love and forgiveness.

Because we are loved we can respond in love. The cross marked on our foreheads is a sign of that love: "God so loved the world..." (John 3:16). It reminds us daily that we are loved. One of the things our Bishops have done over the last couple of years is to try and make people aware of the beginning of Lent by making themselves and local priests available in public places to sign people in Ash. It is remarkable how on Ash Wednesday people respond at train stations and even in the centre of Chichester by being marked with the sign of the cross. As part of my tradition in the Church I am used to making the sign of the cross, but what always moves me most is when I sign the cross before reading the Gospel: on my forehead, on my lips and over my heart. It reminds me that I am asking the Word of God to pierce my mind, lips and heart, helping me to deeper communion with Jesus. It sounds very pious, but it does get my attention to listen to the words of scripture.

As we now turn towards Holy Week and Easter I find, as a Christian, the Torah finds its fulfilment in the events of that great week. On Maundy Thursday, we see Jesus washing the disciple's feet and giving a New commandment to love as we are loved that the world may know his love. In that meal, we celebrate the New Covenant in bread and wine given as a "sign" and in "remembrance".

Group discussion (20 minutes)

1. How do you demonstrate your love for God? Try and give specific examples of how this works in your own lives, the life of your church, and people that you know of.
2. Why can it sometimes be so hard to show our love to God? Identify one particular way you would like to show your love for God more fully, and how others in the group might help you.

Concluding prayer/worship (10 minutes)

You may wish to sit around a cross on the floor as a focus for worship.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord;
and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,
and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind,
and with all thy strength.
This is the first commandment.

And the second is like, namely this:

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

There is none other commandment greater than these.

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Lord, have mercy upon us, and write all these thy laws in our hearts, we beseech thee.

Make the sign of the cross and as you make it remember that you are loved by God that in this sign he conquers. Spend a little time reflecting on how you are loved by God. Spend a little time reflecting on how you are loved by other people. Offer up to God how you might fail to respond to that love.

May your loving mercy come to me, O Lord,
and your salvation according to your word:
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Your word is a lantern to my feet and a light to my path:
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

O let your mercy come to me that I may live,
for your law is my delight:
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

**Father, hear our prayer and forgive us.
Unstop our ears, that we may receive the gospel of the cross.
Lighten our eyes, that we may see your glory in the face of your Son.
Penetrate our minds,
that your truth may make us whole.
Irradiate our hearts with your love,
that we may love one another for Christ's sake. Amen.**

May God who loved the world so much
that he sent his Son to be our Saviour
forgive us our sins
and make us holy to serve him in the world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Song / hymn suggestions: A new commandment / The Servant King

A time of intercession where you may wish to light candles around or before the cross for those in need, or place a nail on a metal tray before the cross as a sign that Christ is there in the midst of our lives. When finishes all join in The Lord's prayer.

Father, your Son showed the depth of his love when, for our sakes, he opened his arms on the Cross; and he has commanded us to love one another. Keep us united in love and faith. Through the saving power of the cross impressed inwardly upon our lives and revealed outwardly in our work, may others come to know your love and your truth, through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

The grace

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore.
Amen.**

Copyright notices:

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise marked, are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England, material from which is included in this course, is copyright © The Archbishop's Council 2000