**Deut 4.1-14 and John 14.15-26**

Lord God, open our ears to hear your Word; open our minds to ponder your truth; open our hearts to receive your love, and open our lives to walk your way. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer.

I don’t know about you but I’ve always been slightly freaked out by moths. I just find them really creepy and always have quite a visceral reaction when one comes anywhere near me.

I still vividly remember being in the bathroom at home when I was about 5 or 6 and my big sister was 2 years older. We were brushing our teeth. It was the summer and so we had the window open, but it was evening so the light was on in the bathroom. A moth flew in and was fluttering around the lightbulb. Suitably outraged that this moth had come in uninvited, I asked my sister why the moth liked the light so much. She replied knowledgeably, as if I really ought to know the answer, “Well, if you saw an ice-cream sitting at the end of the garden, you’d want to go out and run towards it wouldn’t you?!” After that I was a lot more hospitable towards moths seeking out their analogical ice-creams…

It’s such a funny picture that I still remember it. There’s the power of an image for you!

But what if we, as individuals or collectively in our church communities, were like that light bulb or that ice-cream, drawing others in? What if our wisdom, our goodness and our way of life were so attractive that others would want to run towards us, would feel drawn to join us?

When Moses is teaching the Israelites, reminding them of the commandments they have been given to fulfil, he appeals to them to demonstrate their wisdom and understanding to the surrounding nations.

When the nations hear about all these decrees they will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people?” What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near to us whenever we call to him?”

This was probably written at a time when Israel was beginning to understand its role as a light and witness to the nations. They were to proclaim God’s greatness by how they lived according to the commandments and by their wisdom and understanding. And they were to show how a full and flourishing life could look when you call upon God and God is close by.

The whole of Deuteronomy is concerned with teaching people how to live well. One of its key strategies is repetition: Listen! Keep! Guard! Remember! Hear all of the commandments that I am commanding you today, so that you will live long in the land that the Lord your God has promised to your ancestors. This phrase recurs in variations throughout the book. The book itself is a repetition – The Greek name for the book comes from deuteros and nomos (second law) – it is a re-telling of the Exodus journey and of the giving of the law.

Remember what God did for your ancestors!

Remember so that you can pass it on to your children, and your children’s children!

Remember how you stood at the mountain when it was blazing with fire and surrounded by dark clouds?

Remember how you heard the words of the Lord from the midst of the fire on the mountain?

Standing on the other side of the Jordan, about to cross over into the Promised Land after an impossibly long desert journey, Moses is asking this group of people to remember something that they cannot possibly remember. The 40 years in the wilderness has meant a new generation who do not remember, which is why it is so important that they are reminded about their story, that they understand what God has done for them and what God has prepared for them.

“So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.”

Moses has just recounted the journey through the wilderness for 3 chapters. We often ignore these chapters because it seems like a lot of facts and place names – but re-telling the journey matters.

Re-telling the story matters. It’s only in looking back that we can see the mistakes and the triumphs of others and of ourselves. It’s sometimes only in looking back that we can see or remember God’s faithfulness to others and to ourselves. And that’s why chapter 4 begins emphatically with ‘so now’! וְעַתָּה in Hebrew – and now! Because of this, listen carefully!

“You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you. 3 You have seen for yourselves what the Lord did with regard to the Baal of Peor—how the Lord your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor, 4 while those of you who held fast to the Lord your God are all alive today.”

There’s something reassuring about repetition. I remember learning Latin at school and chanting verbs and nouns – patterns I still remember today. They became ingrained in my memory and provided a structure for understanding the language. The fact that I found that reassuring probably says more about my personality than anything else!

But, part of Deuteronomy’s rhetoric, its persuasive power, is that it repeats similar words and phrases to create a structure for understanding the law and for understanding their relationship to God. It contains frequent warnings to the Israelites that they need to make sure they don’t forget.

They mustn’t forget that the Lord promised the land to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

They mustn’t forget that they were once slaves in Egypt and how the Lord rescued them.

They mustn’t forget what happened in the wilderness on the journey– how some people listened to the Lord and followed Him closely, and how some ran after other gods, and it was a pathway to death.

Just like in Psalm 1 and Proverbs 2, we are presented with these two pathways represented by two groups of people: those who followed the Baal of Peor and those who followed the Lord.

The language of ‘holding fast’ or ‘clinging’ to God doesn’t quite capture the meaning in Hebrew here – it’s more dynamic than ‘cling’ – more like ‘stick close behind’. The same verb that’s used when Boaz tells Ruth to stick closely to the women in the field for her protection. So Moses is saying, remember those people who followed right behind God?! They walked in his footsteps.

You can go this way or you can go that way, but you’ve seen what happens to those who wander away from the Lord and choose that other path.

Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children—

And so let **us** look back and testify to God’s goodness and faithfulness in our own lives, as a witness, and in order to teach the next generation the way. Let us repeat the words of the good news, lest we forget. Let us repeat the words of challenge and of comfort.

As John’s Gospel reminds us, we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, the advocate, the comforter, the Spirit of Truth, to remind us of all these things. Jesus told his disciples, “the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

Just reading through the words of the induction service in preparation for today, I was struck by the role of the Holy Spirit. When Nicola makes her affirmations of faith and promises this morning, she does so in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is by God’s spirit that she will be empowered, inspired and encouraged on the particular pathway set before her in this new role.

The image of the spirit in the New Testament sometimes takes the form of fire, as in the description of Pentecost, when there is a mighty wind and something like tongues of fire. This image has its roots in the pillar of fire that accompanies the people of Israel through the desert at night, and also in the revelation of God to his people at Sinai, which Moses reminds the people about in Deuteronomy 4.

You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.

This forms part of a strong and persistent argument in Deuteronomy against the making and worshipping of idols. God is not something that can be contained or constrained by the images and idols made by humans. God’s spirit blows where it will. It is wild and untamed like fire. It is impossible to capture the essence of fire in a carving of wood or stone. Just so, we cannot limit what God can do by defining God or trying to put him in a particular place. We sometimes need to let our imaginations expand, so that we can allow God to do what God wants to do with us, or with our churches. So let us call on him to breathe the fire of his spirit into our lives and into our churches and communities, into our councils and into our mission and ministries.

Psalm 145 assures us: The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. And Paul echoes this when he writes to encourage the Romans, ‘the word of faith is near you, on your lips and in your heart. Call on the name of the Lord and you will be saved.’

The pathway or practice of calling on God becomes easier the more we do it and may the Holy Spirit keep reminding us and enabling us to trust and rely on God. On the pathway we call to God to provide us with a shelter that is trustworthy, a shelter that is not treacherous and will not let us down. The ongoing process of refuge-making isn’t something we are supposed to do alone. We are on the move towards God and at the same time, in communion with God, in Christ. The place and the way, the refuge and the journey, converge in Christ, and we are in Christ even in the darkest and most frightening of places.

And our pathways also converge in community, in worship, singing together in praise, praying together in trust, and working together for justice and righteousness. We gather together around the Lord’s table for refuge and provision, to be sent out to share this refuge and provision with others, encouraging and helping one another as we walk the way.

And so the pathway also becomes a place and means of proclamation.

Our challenge is to become a people to whom others are drawn, because they can see the wisdom of our way as we walk along. What other community of people has a god as near to us as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?

So as we go forward, individually and corporately, let us make calling on God our habit and our habitation, our pathway and our refuge, that we might draw others in to walk the same way. Amen.