

# A Prophet Like Moses

## *A Sermon on Deuteronomy 18:15-22*

Series: Words of Life – Deuteronomy

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Preacher: Tristan Dallas

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Texts: Deuteronomy 18:15-22, John 6:1-35

Over the last three weeks at St George's we've been working our way through the portion of the Book of Deuteronomy that deals with what we might term 'Israel's institutions.' Last week we looked at Moses' provision for the institution of the monarchy. The week before we looked at Moses' legislation concerning Israel's three great pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, festivals which would eventually find their focus in the Temple at Jerusalem. This week we're looking at the institution of prophecy.

Not all of Ancient Israel's institutions can be mapped onto our own life with equal ease. We Tasmanians are, of course, passionate about our public holidays. We're admittedly less passionate about politics, but there are times when even the most cynical among us awaken to the fact that good politicians are vital for society to function well. Prophecy, however, cannot be so easily translated into modern terms. A prophet is someone you consult when you want to know what God's will is when you have to make a decision about something, or you need to know the reason for something that's befallen you, or you want to plan for the future. 'Should I go to war?' 'Why have my crops failed?' 'Just how worried should I be about that rising superpower in the north?' These are the kind of questions an ancient Israelite might bring to a prophet. While the average Tasmanian consults a wide range of advisors – financial advisors, agronomists, meteorologists, political analysts, to name but a few – the person we don't tend to ask these sorts of questions of—is God. And the reason for this, I'm going to suggest, has to do not so much with the secularism of modern Australians, as it does with the fact that, important as questions like the ones I've sketched out were to the people to asked them, and as important as similar questions remain to us today, Christians, who see in Jesus the ultimate prophet, have been taught to ask of their prophet a somewhat different set of questions. But lest I get ahead of myself, I'm going to sketch out for you first the broad contours of where we're headed this morning!

The talk this morning has four parts to it. In the first part, we'll be walking through the eight verses of Deuteronomy which John read for us this morning, and asking the question: Just what was God promising the Israelites in undertaking to provide for them a 'prophet like Moses'? In Part Two of this talk, I'm going to ask another question, namely: Who was Moses for the Israelites, anyway? In the third part of this morning's talk, I'll ask the question: Why did the first Christians see in Jesus a 'prophet like Moses'? And in the last part of this talk I'll ask the question: If Jesus really is the ultimate fulfilment of the prophet promised in Deuteronomy 18, is there anything we need to do in response? Let's dive in!—

## PART ONE

### *A Prophet Like Moses*

The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell speech to the Israelites. Moses has been leading Israel for forty years. The Israelites are now poised to enter the Promised Land, but Moses himself is about to die. Moses gives the people this warning: The people the Israelites will encounter in the Land have their own ways of interacting with the unseen world, and of seeking to enlist its support for their own, earthly concerns. They consult sorcerers and witches; they enquire of people who claim to speak for other gods. In extreme situations, they've even thought it necessary to sacrifice their own children in order to wrest from a god an answer to a problem they face.

Moses wants the Israelites to have nothing to do with practices such as these. In their stead, he offers the Israelites the figure of the prophet, and in giving flesh to this promise he reminds them of one of the great events in their own, not too distant past: God's appearance on Mount Sinai, where, amongst other things, he wrote down for Moses the ten commandments. Moses reminds them of the terror their parents experienced at that moment, when they begged Moses not to let God get too close to them, but to represent them and to report back to them what God would tell him. Now, it may be helpful at this point to tell you that the English word 'prophet' comes from the Greek, *προφήτης* (*prophētes*) a word that's made up of two parts: the Greek word *φημί*, which means 'to speak', and the preposition *πρό* (*pro*), which means 'for' or 'on behalf of'. A prophet, interestingly, is someone who both speaks *for* God, and also *to* God *on your behalf*. What Moses is doing in Deuteronomy 18, then, is reminding the Israelites that a prophet is useful not only as the one on whose lips can be heard God's speech, but also because any unmediated contact with God is frankly—terrifying! The prophet is therefore God's good

provision for a people who can't live well without God but whose sinfulness makes it dangerous for them should God get too close.

One last danger remains, however: What should happen if the man or woman who claims to speak on God's behalf is actually a charlatan, a fake? Deuteronomy is remarkably relaxed about this eventuality, Moses telling the Israelites that if the event foretold by the so-called prophet fails to take place, they can know that that prophet is a fake, which is all very well, you might think, but surely Israel must have experienced many a situation in which it would have been really useful to know God's will right then and there? You can actually see a dilemma of this type unfolding in the much later Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is prophesying that resistance to Babylon is futile, while a rival group of prophets are urging the king to resist the Babylonians at all costs. In the end, Jeremiah was proved right, but advice of the type given here by Moses wouldn't have been particularly useful for the people of Jeremiah's day. Now, I want you to keep this problem in mind, because it's anxiety around this very issue that created a lot of the controversy around Jesus in his day, as we'll see later on.

So much for the role of 'the prophet'. But what about the qualifying 'like Moses' with which it is accompanied? What would an Israelite have expected a prophet 'like Moses' to look like?

## PART TWO

*Who was Moses for the Israelites, anyway?*

Much of this question we can answer just in the terms of these verses. Moses is the great mediator who stands between God and his people, who faithfully passes on everything he has heard from God, just as he has been doing for the entirety of his speech. Moses is the brother who speaks on behalf of his fellow Israelites. Moses' hearers all knew that the scene on Mount Sinai had ended in near disaster, with the Israelites setting up a golden calf to worship and God poised to destroy them. On that occasion Moses, even though the Israelites were unaware of it at the time, had pleaded with God to spare them. A 'prophet like Moses' is therefore a prophet you can rely on to stick their neck out for you and plead your case, even when your case is a pretty thin one!

Elsewhere in the Book of Deuteronomy we see in Moses someone who not only pleads, but actually suffers for Israel on their behalf. In chapter nine of Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the

Israelites of how he had fasted strenuously when pleading with God on their behalf, and in chapter four he even goes so far as to say that he experienced God's anger, anger that ought to have fallen on the Israelites themselves, climaxing in the fact that ultimately, while the Israelites themselves are about to cross over into the good land, he will not. A 'prophet like Moses' is, in Deuteronomy, someone who will suffer from God on your behalf because of what you yourself have done.

Following this train of thought in the Book of Deuteronomy has, then, led us a certain distance away from the Ancient Near Eastern conception of the prophet as someone who can find out what God's will is in whatever concrete dilemma you're facing at the moment. This understanding of the office of prophet makes his or her job description a pretty full-on calling! And while it's true that as an ideal it certainly was embodied by many of Israel's subsequent prophets – Jeremiah and Ezekiel, for example, come readily to mind – it's also true that this promise of God seems, in these terms, at any rate, to transcend an institution and look rather for ultimate fulfilment in some particular figure. God seems to be promising his people not only someone who will speak for him, not only someone who will intercede for his people, not only someone who will suffer for his people, but – even more specifically – someone who will suffer *at their hands*. Which leads me to—

### PART THREE

#### *Jesus, the Prophet*

Perhaps you've been wondering whether I was going to refer at all to that rather long passage we had read for us this morning from the Gospel of John! In our Bible study this year, we've been reading through John's Gospel, and one of the questions on people's lips in this Gospel concerns a figure they call the Prophet (with a capital 'P!'). So, for example, in chapter one, a group of Pharisees come to John the Baptist and ask him whether *he* is this Prophet. In chapter six, you may have noticed, after Jesus has performed the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the people exclaim, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world!'

Having spent the first half of this morning's sermon in Deuteronomy 18, it's not too hard to see why the people react in this way. After all, if you think about what Moses was (and is!) most famous for, surely the feeding of the people with manna in the wilderness has to be right up there! And as if to underline the similarity, what Jesus does next, in walking on water, would also have reminded his disciples of perhaps the other most famous event associated with Moses—the

parting of the Red Sea. This is John's way of saying, 'Jesus is the Prophet like Moses promised back in Deuteronomy 18.' And this would have been obvious to first-century Jews, who were far more conversant with the Book of Deuteronomy than we are. Now, Jesus' identity as the Prophet is really only one strand in John 6, and if this was a sermon on John 6, we'd be spending time looking at how Jesus goes on to differentiate himself from Moses, and interestingly associates himself far more closely with the manna, the heavenly bread with which God fed the Israelites in the desert. But as it's not, I'm going to restrict myself to the following question: If Jesus really is the ultimate fulfilment of the prophet promised in Deuteronomy 18, is there anything we need to do in response?

#### PART FOUR

##### *Responding to Jesus*

Happily for us, the response God is looking for from us is, in both our passages today, really straightforward! In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses tells the Israelites:

The LORD your God will raise up a prophet for you like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.

Listening to Jesus means, in the first place, sitting down to read the four Gospels, the four books in the New Testament which preserve the teaching he handed down to his first followers. It means mulling over them; arguing with them; carrying them with you through the day.

Ultimately, it means shaping your life around them, so that Jesus' words can be seen by others to be the mould into which you've poured your life, so that Jesus' words are the thing that gives your life shape and that give coherence to the various decisions you make. All of us have various questions that we bring to God, questions that come out of our present experience, questions that relate to problems we face, and the things that bother us. God loves you and he wants you to bring him your questions. But Deuteronomy 18 reminds us that God has a question for us, and that question is: 'Are you listening to Jesus?'

In John 6:28, the crowd who have pursued Jesus across the lake ask him,

'What must we do to do the works God requires?'

And Jesus tells them,

‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’

Many people who’ve made the decision to become Christian from time to time ask themselves the question, ‘Am I doing this right?’ They read Jesus’ words and they make an honest assessment of how well they’ve been putting those words into practice—and they lose heart. Jesus’ words here remind us that more important than any of our efforts to listen and absorb Jesus’ teaching is Jesus’ call for us to trust him: to find in him the Prophet like Moses who speaks to God on our behalf; who suffers and dies on our behalf; who leads us through the waters of death; the one firm anchor that holds us fast.

Let’s pray:—

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for sending us Jesus. Help us to listen to him. Help us to trust him all our days. In his name, Amen.