



## **A Sermon Preached at Choral Evensong**

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*Deuteronomy 34.1-12*

We're told of Moses' fate that: 'He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.' What we are probably reading here is a statement designed to discourage any attempt at looking for Moses' remains in order to take them into the Promised Land against God's prohibition – even in death Moses cannot enter the Promised Land.

How is it that Moses can be so acclaimed and yet be thwarted in these last moments with God?

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel. (Deuteronomy 34.10)

Moses has brought the people of Israel through the wilderness, he has talked with God face to face (rather than in dreams or visions); yet now he is only allowed to look at the land to which his feet have been marching for more than forty years. Moses began his ministry of covenant mediator on one mountain (i.e., Sinai), and now he ended that ministry on another mountain. But in death he is denied the opportunity to enter the land to which he has been travelling so long. It hardly seems fair, and might seem to be a discouragement from committing ourselves to any comparable journey with God.

The lengthy description of the land in Deuteronomy 34:1-3 is meant to impress on us the extent of the land promised by God. If you were to stand at the top of Mt Nebo and look over the Jordan, you would realise that, even on a very clear day not all that is described would actually be visible to Moses even though we are told that 'his sight was unimpaired'. What he 'sees' in the story is the fullness of God's promise, and it is far more than he is able to see literally.

Without pushing that analogy too far, this has been the case all along. Moses' 'vision' has been inspired by the spirit of wisdom with which he has been gifted and which he will now pass to Joshua ('Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses.') It is with this spirit of wisdom rather than the limits of his own vision (which has often been clouded with uncertainty) that Moses sees.

This story is a reminder that the promises are always for us; it is the promises that make the relationship; the fulfilment may well be for someone else. Even with such honours, the fact remains that Moses is constrained by the limits of human life and divine decision. The point is made here (as well as in the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, mentioned as the recipients of God's promise of land that those who lead God's people, intercede for them and reprimand them when they transgress, the true servants of the Lord (v. 5), do not necessarily see the fulfilment of God's promise. This may not seem just to us on God's part, and we may not like to have to live with the mystery of God's actions, but the fact is that Moses' part in God's purpose for his people is now over. He has led the people from Egypt and given them the law. They will now have Joshua to follow who will have a different task. They have the law which will guide them in the future as Moses has done in the past.

Faith in Israel's God might mean leading his people toward a vision that will, at the end of one's calling or life, still remain a vision for the future. It will be the task of the leader to prepare the people for that vision, keep it "visible" for them and ensure that there are those who are willing to take up the task. It may also be the task of the leader, as in the case of Moses, to die ahead of their people in order that they too may understand that they live under a vision that transcends us all. Even the best human effort will fall short; the true liberator must be God.

If we still feel Moses is hard-done-by then perhaps we should look at a little detail in verse 6, where the Authorised Version is a little closer to the Hebrew than is the NRSV from which we heard tonight: So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, at the command of the Lord. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day.

The clear indication of the text is that God himself buried Moses, just as he himself sealed Noah in the Ark (Genesis 7.16) Instead of Moses' descendants taking the responsibility for burying him God Himself performs this deeply personal task. It

is presented to us as a last act of loving loyalty from the God who called Moses out of the burning bush and went before him as fire and smoke.