June 11th at Stowe ( Judges 6 and Mtt 8) Judges 7 2-22

Modified from Trin20 2011 Jn 15 9-17

**Gideon**

We don’t get that much of Gideon, nor of the book of Judges. Just one Communion Reading in three years and one or two at M and EP.

Gideon comes from the period of the Judges. What the theologians call the Amphictiony., why they could not stick to a simple word, like tribal goodness knows.

The 12 tribes of Israel have settled in the promised land, Joshua has died and they find that they are prone to attack from surrounding peoples and those whom they displaced. One might say plus ça change

When they obey God all is well when they disobey they lose the battles and are in trouble. God sends them Judges, we would call them tribal leaders, to beat off the opposition, and call the people back to obedience to the one true God. Interestingly there are women leaders in this period, as well as men. And you heard about one of them recently

After 40 years of peace under Deborah, as recorded in the last verse of Judges 5 Judges in CH 6 begins with the people again doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and so he gave them into the hands of the Midianites, who came up with their men and cattle like locusts in number. We are told that even their camels could not be counted

Israel cries to the Lord who then sends a prophet to sort them out and tell what the problem is – their disobedience -, and sends an angel in disguise who tells Gideon that God has chosen him, a mighty warrior, to rescue his people. Now Gideon who has been hiding from the enemy in his winepress, is not too keen on this especially the mighty warrior bit. And in any case he wants to know if God is with him why has the disaster of the Midianites happened? He objects that he is from the smallest tribe, The angel reveals himself and disappears in a puff of smoke, quite literally. He is sort of convinced and builds an altar to the Lord, cuts down the totem pole of Baal the Canaanite God, burns a sacrifice to the Lord on it – and that is significant, the false God of Baal is nothing more than firewood for the Lord, but is in trouble for it with the local Baal worshippers. Fortunately his Father says let Baal fight for himself..

Gideon is then filled with the Spirit of the Lord, as the prophets and people of spiritual courage always are and calls his fellow Israelites to arms but then has doubts again – how very human and encouraging for us to hear about! This time he tests God with the fleece, twice. First he asks for it to be dry when all around is wet then the opposite. Dew is a symbol of God’s blessing so this is significant, it shows God giving and withholding his blessing. Then we get to the battle

God knows that if he allows victory through Gideon and a large army, either Gideon, or the people or both will think they did themselves. Indeed later in Chapter 8 they call on Gideon to be their leader because they say he delivered them from the hand of the Midianites.

Under the guidance of the Spirit, who gives to Gideon not physical strength but wisdom, the army is reduced and the plot conceived. Gideon still needs further support from the Lord- how very like us – but eventually he gets on with it. And using empty clay pots, firebrands and trumpets causes a rout.

The jars are significant. Clay pots are referred to several times in the bible, notably in psalm 2 where God breaks his enemies like a potters vessel. Here the emptiness of the Jars perhaps is suggestive of the emptiness or uselessness of Israel’s life without God,

The torches are symbols of the Light of salvation. Once Israel which has become a useless vessel, is broken before God then the light of salvation shines out again, to her salvation and the confusion of her enemies.

The trumpets often spoken of in scripture as giving a warning that God will act in judgement here herald that judgement. The Midianites, oppressors of the poor, baal worshippers and men interested in their own wellbeing only, turn on themselves and destroy each other. We might wonder and hope that a similar outcome will hit Putin and aggressors like him whose interests are not primarily focussed on the people they are supposed to be serving as leader..

Now Gideon, like so many of the heroes of Scripture is not an obvious choice. And in any case sometimes the obvious choices, like King Saul who was quite an imposing figure, turn out to be failures. We can find many more examples of scriptural heroes who are not obviously leaders as well as some like David who were natural leaaders. Moses who did not want the job, Peter, impetuous but whose courage failed at the vital moment, The prophet Ezekiel weird to the point of being almost mad, Amos the sheep farmer and sycamore dresser who refused the title prophet, and many others.

The key to the courage of Gideon and other scriptural heroes is in the phrase that God speaks to Gideon when he objects.  **But I shall be with you,**  and in what happens before Gideon commits to leading the fight.  **But the Spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon.**  He still had to get on with it but not in his own strength. True, he falters once or twice, which tells us that he knew the task was impossible without God. Courage is a combination of natural personality and spiritual strength, but the emphasis has to be on the latter. We should pray for spiritual courage to equip us for whatever task, usually small but occasionally great that God has in mind for us.