Sermon Sunday 23rd April 2023 at Stowe at 9.45am

Deborah

Judges 4: 1-24

Luke 1: 46-55 (Magnificat)

I wonder, if you were to be asked: ‘What is your biggest problem?’ what you would say.

For the Israelites, in the time of this chapter of Judges, if you ask them ‘What is your biggest problem?’ they would almost certainly say ‘Sisera’. He was the commander of the Canaanite army with all those 900 iron chariots.

In fact, in truth, their biggest problem is there in v.1 – they rejected God. Lack of allegiance, or loyalty to God. The Canaanite gods were, it seems, too attractive to Israel.

Pray.

Context.

Othniel was the first judge. Shamgar and Ehud were also Judges, predecessors to Deborah, and during their reign there were 80 years of peace in the land. And after the events of these two chapters there are forty more years of peace. But what do we find here? v1 says ‘After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the sight of the Lord.’ And what happened? They were oppressed for 20 years. The king of Canaan called Jabin caused all sorts of misery to the Israelites. By the way, to call Jabin King of Canaan is a bit misleading. There was no Canaanite nation at that time, and Jabin was effectively king only over the Canaanite city state of Hazor. However, he was powerful enough to oppress the Israelites. No doubt about that. All this happened in about 1100 BC. This is one of the earliest events in the OT.

This verse ‘After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the sight of the Lord’ tells us so much about the Israelites, though it’s not unique to them. We might find a parallel in our own lives here. In Israel’s case, the trajectory of the nation is up, and down, and up, and down…

What the OT is constantly teaching is that Israel cannot save herself. It is God who gives them Judges, and it is God who brings the tyrant to oppress them when the judge (and therefore God) is disobeyed.

The other obvious lesson from Scripture, Old and New, is that God does not like sin. He hates sin. He punishes sin. And when his people sin he punishes them. But the overarching message that also keeps coming out is that God loves his people, with a love that is impossible to reach the bottom of. He loves, and loves, and goes on loving us. But he goes on hating our sin. And because he loves us and hates our sin he does something about it. In this case he sends people who can help. And one such is Deborah.

The name Deborah means ‘Bee’. Matthew Henry says that ‘her very name suggests the work of the bee: industrious, sharp perception (discernment), great usefulness, sweetness to her friends, and sharpness to her enemies.’

Deborah is a Judge. You might remember that Moses was a judge for the people; and so committed and overworked was he that he nearly had a nervous breakdown, until his father-in-law Jethro had a great idea: ‘Why don’t you appoint others who can help in the judging?’ And Moses did. Thank God for wise fathers-in-law.

All this took place before Israel had a king. This was before David, or Solomon. It wouldn’t be long before Israel wanted to have a king like the other countries around them. And God, though unwilling, later allowed it to happen. But at this time in their history they had no king, and so the Judges more or less ran the country. A bit like the Civil Service or the Judiciary running the country rather than the government, or the monarchy. Sort of.

So what do we know about Deborah? Not much, to be honest. She was the only woman ever to become a judge – well ahead of her time. She was married, to a man called Lappidoth. We know even less about him.

Deborah was also a prophetess. Now prophets are usually thought of as those who can see into the future, and that is indeed often part of a prophet’s task. But more often a prophet should be considered, not a fore-teller but a forth-teller; in other words they tell it how it is. They speak truth to power. They hear God’s words and they tell those words to others, whoever they are, however powerful they might be.

Notice how Deborah sent for Barak – commander of Israel’s armed forces – and told him straight what God had told her. ‘Go, take 10,000 men to Mount Tabor ready for a fight.’ And because of her reputation Barak obeyed, albeit with conditions. ‘I’ll only go if you go with me.’ Not sure if that was a cop-out or a vote of confidence in her reputation. I prefer to think he wanted – needed - God’s presence on the battlefield, and having Deborah there would ensure God was there too.

Now Deborah had a dilemma here. She had a clear word from God, and she passed it on to Barak, expecting it to be obeyed in full. But there was a snag. He agreed, but added a clause that God hadn’t included. So what should she do? She could

(a) dismiss him and find someone more co-operative or

(b) order him to go anyway but without her or

(c) do it all herself instead of him or

(d) agree and work alongside him.

Sometimes we are faced with such a dilemma. We need the wisdom of Solomon – but of course in Deborah’s time Solomon hadn’t yet been born. How do you handle difficult choices? Talk to others and talk to God.

Deborah’s decision was to agree to go with him, but added her own clause that, as a result, he wouldn’t get the full credit for any victory that was achieved – that honour would go to a woman. Not Deborah, but a woman called Jael. We’ll come to her in a bit.

Part of God’s plan was to defeat the opposition on the battlefield, and also defeat the fleeing general, called Sisera, who was in charge. And that’s where Jael came in.

So, let battle commence – and the Canaanite opposition was roundly beaten, despite their 900 iron chariots. Sisera was the only one to escape slaughter – the army were routed by the Israelite forces. Sisera ran to what he thought was a friendly camp of a Kenite ally called Heber, and was met by – guess who – Jael, who was Heber’s wife. The Kenites were allied to the Canaanites, though Heber seems to have broken rank and was becoming more sympathetic to the Israelites. It’s clear that Jael had Israeli sympathies – **and,** what’s more, she had a cunning plan.

She welcomed Sisera with open arms. ‘Come in, my Lord, come right in.’ She gave him shelter in the tent, a blanket to help him sleep, a glass of milk (when he had asked for water) – and then, as soon as he was asleep, she took a tent peg and a mallet and hammered the peg through his forehead and killed him. Nice.

Incidentally it would be the women who were responsible for setting up camp, so Jael would we well-practiced in wielding hammer and pegs.

So God’s plan, and Deborah’s instructions, resulted in the complete annihilation of the Canaanite army, and resulted in an extended time of peace. And Jael got the credit, not Barak, just as Deborah predicted.

Further, she wrote a lengthy anthem to praise God for victory, making up all of ch 5, which is longer than the account of what actually happened, in ch 4. You can read that for yourselves when you get home.

Lessons we can learn from Deborah.

**1. Be Obedient**

If God is telling you to do something or go somewhere, despite your fears, listen to His call.  He has plans that we cannot begin to understand, and hearts and lives may be changed by our obedience.

**2. Be Courageous**

The old saying "God doesn't call the qualified, He qualifies the called" applies here.  Doing something out of your comfort zone to glorify Him can be terrifying, but faith was never promised to be easy.  Be bold. Be courageous - for His glory.

**3. Stand True**

Never waiver in your faith. We may not always know what the road ahead will look like, but we only need to remember that God will faithfully guide us and lead the way.

Deborah stands as a shining example of a servant of God, one prepared to listen carefully to what God is saying and then making sure it happens, inasmuch as it lies with you. It wasn’t necessarily easy for her to do what she did, but she did it, and did it well.

For us, we must remember the last words of Jesus on earth: ‘Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all I have told you’. That means passing on what we have experienced of Jesus, telling our faith-story to those we are in contact with. I had an email from a Crusader this week, reminding me that at one Whitsun camp I was his tent-leader. He said this: ‘I can still recall you as my first tent leader at Whitsun camp all those years ago. Thank you for your part in my walk with Jesus.’

We simply have no idea what our words will achieve. A simple, short conversation that you have long forgotten might stick in their mind and help them in their search for Jesus and their subsequent walk with him. We are not all evangelists, but we should all be witnesses. We sow the seed, and others may reap the harvest. But without our sowing, there is no fruit.

Let’s pray for all our conversations in the coming week, as we share what we know of God with those who are seeking. Keep listening to him, and speaking for him. Give thanks for the example of Deborah and so many others.

Pray.