

WHERE DOES YOUR LOYALTY LIE?

14th May 2017

Readings: Joshua 22:14-24; Judges 2:1-4

Are you good at picking political spin? With the general election four months away posturing and rhetoric is on the rise and with it more political spin, especially when inconvenient truth undermines their agenda. So the negative are dressed up to make the politicians look good and the positives are exaggerated to the party's advantage. Here's an example; a political cartoon of the swine flu crisis from a few years back. The politician says "Run for your lives!!" while the party spokesman says, "He means jogging's good for you".



That's political spin. "It's not really that bad and we have it under control."

And there's religious spin as well? Would you recognise it? Church leaders taking an unpleasant truth and crouching it in a good light. Here's another cartoon showing a congregation where half the pews turned 180 degrees, so half the congregation have the backs to the other. Addressing his people the minister says, "It's come to my attention that there's been a minor split in the congregation". Again, "It's not really that bad. We have it under control".

Now the opening chapter of Judges is largely spin. It sounds great up front but underneath there's an unpleasant truth. What's this unpleasant truth? "Well, we didn't do what God wanted us to do". Now like good political spin it's hard to pick up so let's see what we can ferret out. Turn to Judges 1:1. As we do a reminder Judges is an in between book. A book that describes the time between God's people arriving in the Promised Land and the setting up of the first king. In this time, God's himself was to be their King and from time to time he would rise up a Judge to rule over them. So, we read in Judges 1:1

After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, "Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?" Judges 1:1

What's happening here and who is Joshua? Well Joshua's career was long and successful. He was one of the Israelites who escaped Egypt. He was one of two faithful spies who came back to Moses with a good report. He became Moses right hand man and commander of the army. He took over after Moses' death and led the Israelites in success after success as they conquered the Promised Land.

Now, interestingly in Joshua's farewell speech, just before his death, there's reveling exchange between him and the people that impacts all of Judges. Turn back one page to Joshua 24:14

"Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Joshua 24:14–15

How do God's people respond?

"Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other god's". Judges 24:16

And Joshua says, and I paraphrase, "Are you really sure".

"Yes, we are", they reply

"Are you really, really sure"

"Most defiantly" they reply, "One hundred percent!"

"Now then," said Joshua, "throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." Joshua 24:23.

Notice the irony? Here they are making grand promises to God yet back in their tents were Canaanite idols they'd picked up during the campaign. This does not bode well. Why? Because we love to pick up idols on the way. And the Israelites are like a child making a promise with their fingers crossed behind their back, thinking this makes it OK to renege later on.

Anyway that's a refresher on Joshua and what he had to put up with. Now back to Judges 1:1

After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, "Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?" Judges 1:1

Here we also learn that the conquest of the Promised Land wasn't over. It was mostly done but not completely done. And with Joshua's death God's people ask God, "Who shall we fight next".

What a great start to Judges! If the last verse in Judges is grim and depressing then this opening verse is full of optimism and hope. Instead of asking God after screwing-up they ask God before stepping out. So...

The Lord answered, “Judah is to go; I have given the land into their hands.”
Judges 1:2

Judah is obedient and they're successful. In particular two men are highlighted. Caleb and Othniel. Who's Caleb? Well, he's the second spy who along with Joshua brought a good report to Moses all those years ago. Now an old man, he's fight fit and rearing for battle.

Then there's Othniel. He's a good man, brave in battle. Because of his valor and success in battle he wins the hand of Caleb's daughter. We'll meet him again later when he becomes Israel's first and most successful Judge. But we get ahead of ourselves.

So the first half of the chapter describes Judah's largely successful campaign, but then the wheels start to fall off. And we start to get the spin.

But Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth Shan or Taanach or Dor or Ibleam or Megiddo and their surrounding settlements, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that land. Judges 1:27

So the tribe of Manasseh fails. But to put a good spin on this failure we read...

When Israel became strong, they pressed the Canaanites into forced labor but never drove them out completely. Judges 1:28

What they're saying is, “It's not really that bad and we have it under control”. And the spin continues - an omission of failure, followed by spin.

“Nor did Ephraim... Neither did Zebulun... Nor Asher, ...Nether Naphtali”, followed by some comment about Canaanites becoming forced labor or the like.

What's really happening here? Well. the Israelites started putting God's command to evict all the Canaanites from the land in the too hard basket, and besides there was financial gain to be had. By letting the stronger Canaanites live among them then they could buy and sell and trade. For those they could overcome - well, labour at no cost. Those here who own a business, imagine your profit margins if the majority of your workers worked for nothing. Attractive isn't it?

But what's the result? What's happened when they didn't fully obey God, when they split their loyalty. The Israelites are now live alongside idol-worshipping Canaanites. Instead of throwing out the inhabitants and their evil ways, including child sacrifice; instead of ridding themselves of their idols with their pull away from God they now live and trade among those that worship other gods. And no matter how much spin you put on this, it's is a recipe for disaster.

So much so God sends a special envoy.

The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you." Judges 2:1–3

God had always been clear. "Though you're the smallest of nations - just a bunch of slaves in Egypt - I chose to bless you abundantly as long as you look up to me and not sideways to other nations. Yet look at you know. You're either trading with or forcing them to work for you when I said, 'No!'. Because of your disloyalty to me and my ways these people and their idols will be always be a trap for you."

To their credit God's people repent, weeping aloud and offering sacrifices. But the damage was done and the scene is set for the rise of the first Judge.

Now let's pause for a moment and consider the implications for us. If there are any? For this happened about three and a half thousand years ago on the other side of the world. Not only that but New Zealand is not rife with statues of deities being worshiped on street corners and public places. I've been in a number of your homes and, unless you hid them before I visited, I've seen no household gods or shrines. So, what relevance is idol worship for us. Plenty. Do not be fooled. We humans are idol factories. What do I mean by this? Well, God designed us to be creatures of worship - creatures that worship him. But since rebelling in the garden we try and worship anything but God. So for us moderns its not idols of Baal and Ashtoreth. No, we bow down to but idols of money, or career, or our children, or reputation or whatever.

And what we worship we serve. You cannot separate the two. If we worship God we will serve him and he will be our master. This leads to blessings and life. However, if we worship career, money or children they will then master and eventually destroy us.

And because the idols I've mentioned aren't bad in themselves, we often fool ourselves that they're not idols. That we have everything in perspective. We start to put a spin on our faith life. We convince ourselves we're OK 'cause we go to church read the Bible and are doing our Christian duty, yet... Christ is not our first love. This is the danger of everyone in this room.

And the sobering truth is that none of us has the power to break the hold idols have in our heart. We cannot break an idol's hold by willpower, tears or counseling. For when we loosen one idols grip there's always another to take its place.

You don't believe me when I say we can't break an idol's hold in our own strength? Let's check this against God's Word. Let's dive into Joshua's final speech. Remember Joshua challenged the people, "Choose for yourselves this day who you will follow... as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord". Judges 24:15-16

And the people responded, "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord and follow other god's" Judges 24:16

And Joshua's next words in verse 19 are telling and accurate, cutting to the quick.

Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God... Joshua 24:19

In your own strength it's impossible to rid yourselves of idols. God is Holy and we are not. God is generous and we take his gifts and use to our own ends. He's jealous in a protective caring way as husband protects and cares for his bride. But our loyalty is elsewhere and not on our groom. No, we are not able to rid ourselves of the idols gripping our heart.

And what's the answer? Where's the way out? Is there a way out? Well, to answer this we need to look at the bigger picture in the book of Judges. As we read through the various accounts the only time idols are kept in check is when God raises a Judge to rescue his people. And we'll see this time and time again. When a good judge rules, God's people flourish. And each of these judges in their own way - even the rogue Samson - point to the true and better Judge who would come to smash the hold idols have in our lives. Yes, Jesus came to set us free from the grip of sin and death; to shatter the idols we manufacture in our hearts. Jesus does this by displacing the idol so he himself becomes the affection of our hearts. There is no other way.

What's look like in practice. Well, a career is a good thing. In the garden before the fall God gave Adam work for his hands. So, in God's eyes a honest day's work on the factory floor or in the office is just as pleasing as a missionary or minister at their work. Yet our career can easily become an idol. It can become our primary source of identity. We soar when our careers are strong. We despair when our careers stall. So the best way to know if our career has become an idol is our reaction when it's threatened. If we're passed over for promotion, then it's natural to feel disappointed. But if we're passed over and are devastated, we feel the bottom has dropped out of world, we find no pleasure in family, hobbies or faith, if we struggle to get out of bed, or turn to gambling, porn or an affair - then God is showing us we have an idol that's become a snare and will destroy our life.

And you won't be able to rid any idol by yourself. It's impossible on in your own strength. It's only as we look to Jesus, the true and better Judge, that the idol's hold will be shattered. And it will only stay shattered as we look to him. And given each of us is an idol factory, that can generate idol after idol, do you think we can do this alone? No. For while each of us must look to Christ first, each of us can help others along the way. Together as the body of Christ - as his dearly loved bride - we can help each other keep free from idols that knock on our door. How? By being church. By gathering on Sunday's, in small groups and Alpha. By serving each other - in the big and small - on the roster and maybe in Kid's Church or as an elder. And we pray, befriend and encourage.

So, today, what have looked at? Well, we've seen Israel charged with throwing out the Canaanites and ridding idols from the land. But instead they compromise - for ease and financial gain they disobey God. Instead of looking up to God, they look sideways to the nations. In doing so they find themselves living among idol worshipping Canaanites setting themselves up for the trouble that'll plague them for generations. Now, it's only when God raises up a Judge that they prosper and we praise God that our Heavenly Father has raised up for us a true in better Judge - raised even from dead - Jesus. He alone can shatter the idols in our lives. As we look to him in faith - believing in our hearts God raised him from the dead and confessing him as Lord - will we win over every snare of the devil and every idol of the heart. In Christ alone is the victory. To his name be all glory and praise. Amen and Amen