

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT

25th June 2017

Readings: Judges 4:1-24¹

What's it cost you to be a Christian? At the very least this morning has cost you a sleep-in or relaxed brunch at lovely cafe. What else has it cost? Maybe it's cost you a friendship, hit your bank balance or even cause problems with your family. A couple of years ago a Chinese student, Sue², became a Christian at Auckland University through a campus ministry. At first she kept this from her parents as they, especially her father, would not be impressed. She was right. For, eventually, , she felt she just had to tell her parents what a difference Christ was making in her life. Her father dug his heels in. He was adamant. He laid down the law with no middle ground. It was either family or Christ. She chose Christ and was thrown out of the family home and cut off. How would you feel? Fortunately she was attending a good church. One family helped with accommodation. One of the men, who loved cars, helped source a reliable, second hand car and services it for her. With the help of the church and friends she's been able to continue her studies. So, has it cost you anything to follow Jesus?



Prayer

This morning we come to our next Judge - Barak. However, it turns out two women and not he who are the real heroes of the story. How does this all play out? Well, Judges is all about a series of rescue missions. And though Barak plays a key role, more so do two women. So this morning we'll look at Deborah, Barak, Jael and how God uses them to rescue his people. Then we'll look at the implications for us and finally how Barak's story points to Christ.

Now the circumstances surrounding this rescue mission are told in two places. Chapter 4 describes the rescue as a story while chapter 5 describes the same rescue as a poem. We'll spend most of our time in Judges 4 starting at verse 1 but will dip into chapter 5 from time to time.

After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord. So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan... The commander of his army was Sisera... Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had

¹ but only read vs 4-16

² Not real name

cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.
Judges 4:1–3

Here we have the beginning of the pattern of Judges. A previous judge dies. God's people turn to evil. God then gives them over to a neighbouring nation who oppresses them cruelly. Eventually the people cry out and God sends a new judge to rescue them.

So after this brief description of oppression and crying out for help we expect to meet the next judge. However, we're in for a surprise. For instead we meet a woman. A most extraordinary and unexpected woman.

Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided. Judges 4:4–6

So what do we learn here about Deborah? Heaps! First, she's a prophetess. This means she spoke God's word. God's people, both men and women, listened and respected her ministry. Secondly, she's married and 5:7 tells us she was a mother. Thirdly, she's leading Israel. Now, being a prophet did not automatically mean you led the country. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were famous prophets but they never led Israel - neither did Jonah, Amos nor Malachi. In fact it was most unusual for a prophet to lead God's people - a real honour. We have to turn to Moses or Samuel to put Deborah's role perspective. Fourthly, she's doing the work of a judge. Now most civil disputes were settled by elders who sat at the town gate. Later in Israel's history difficult cases were brought to the king. Remember the mothers of two infants who came before King Solomon. One infant died in the night and one mother accused the other of swapping babies. This didn't go to the town elders but straight to the king. So in this respect Deborah is fulfilling the role of a king. Now, she wasn't queen, but her actions and the description of her holding court bring this to mind. Fifthly, though there was another male judge in Israel, she held this top role. Who was this other judge? Well in the last verse in chapter 3 we have a one-verse description of the judge Shamger and in chapter 5 verse 6 it is clear he was alive in Deborah's day.

Now, what are to make of this astonishing woman? Well, here we've a rare but compelling example of a woman in the top leadership role in the country. And any debate on the role of woman in the church must factor in Deborah. What debate? Many, but not all, will know that women ministers, Bible teachers and elders has been, and still is in some circles, controversial. Now Deborah's story has been used on both sides of the argument let me make some brief comments with respect to women in leadership.

I need to point out Bible stories, especially in the Old Testament, are descriptive not prescriptive. What do I mean by this? Well, just because a story describes a situation doesn't mean we must follow its example. Let me give you an example. Later in Judge's we'll read of a judge who sacrifices her daughter. Awful. Does it mean we should do the same? Heaven forbid - No! The Bible describes what happened not prescribes. Last year we looked at Saul using a medium to call up the dead Samuel. Should we use mediums to call up our loved ones. Certainly not. Why? Because other parts of scripture clearly teach against child sacrifice and calling on mediums. With any story, we must draw on other parts of the Bible and consider and the implications of the cross before we follow suit.

Now, Deborah's story clearly shows a woman doing an excellent job leading Israel but it doesn't prescribe we must do the same. We must go to other parts of the Bible. This story wasn't written to straighten out our ideas about women in leadership. The story is about God's rescue. However, the implications for women in leadership are important and must be considered. Deborah's story opens the door for us to look elsewhere in the Bible, especially the New Testament, for positive examples of women in leadership - and they're there.

Now back to the story. As prophetess Deborah hears a Word from God. She is to recruit Barak to head up the army. As a good leader she obeys God's promoting. Sending for Barak she tells him...

"The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. 7 I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.' " Judge 4:6-7

Here we are introduced to Barak. Now, we all know how important first impressions are. So let's see how he goes.

Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go." Judges 4:8

Not the best is it? He knows Deborah's a prophetess who speaks God's word but he hesitates. He makes his obedience to God conditional. We can understand why. Nine hundred chariots and supporting ground troops was formidable compared to what Barak could muster. Technologically and numerically the Israelites were facing a hiding to nothing. And so Barak makes his obedience conditional. "I'll only face Sisera on my terms." This is not how we're to respond to God's Word. God seeks simple obedience, especially when it's tough and we have to trust him. For there are times as individuals and as a church where we have to step out in faith and just do it. With the new financial year Parish Council is working on the church budget. With new mission initiatives and extra staff we'll be stretched. There'll be a new element of faith we'll have to grapple with. But God wants mature Christians not comfortable Christians. He didn't come to make life easy but make men and women great - as he does with Barak and his army.

And despite Barak's weak faith God graciously allows him his request - but with a twist.

"Very well," Deborah said, "I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman." Judges 4:9

The twist is any honour gained in victory will not go to Barak but to a woman - whom we assume is Deborah.

Events proceed quickly. Opposing armies gather with Sisera and his chariots in the plains and Israel in their favoured hill country. Chariots are negated in the hills so the Israelites wait on Mt Tabor for Sisera's army to attack them - but no. God does not want his people to do the sensible thing but the brave thing.

For Deborah says to Barak, "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" Judges 4:14

And to Barak's credit he does. He and his men, trusting God, against the odds, go down into the plains to fight - though this would normally mean certain defeat.

At Barak's advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot. Judge 4:15

Yes, the Lord routed the enemy. Both 4:7 and 5:21 indicate God sent a flood to wash away some chariots and bogged down the rest. Barak and his men got the upper hand and God routed the Canaanites in a great victory. None escape - except Sisera himself. Fleeing on foot he finds refuge in the tent of an ally. For Haber and his wife Jael are friendly toward Sisera's king. To the relief of Sisera, Jael welcomes in.

"I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up. Judge 4:19

Asking for water Jael mothers him. Makes a fuss. Gives him milk and a safe place to rest - or so Sisera thinks. For...

Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died. Judge 4:21

Well, who saw that coming? No one! And Deborah's prophecy came true. Barak didn't receive the honour that day - a woman did. Not Deborah but Jael. Jael slew the great enemy of God's people.

And so we come to the end of this familiar cycle in Judges for...

On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin, the Canaanite king, until they destroyed him. Judges 4:23–24

And at the end of chapter 5

Then the land had peace forty years. Judges 5:31

So, one judge, Ehud the assassin died. The people turned to evil. A nation oppressed them. The people cried out. God sent a judge, Barak and God's people were saved.

And what are we to make of this? Well we've already looked at one implication. The implication of Deborah's example for women leaders in today's church. It doesn't silence the debate but with Deborah we have a positive, God ordained example of what cannot be ignored. But what else is there for us? What more is there?

Well, I want to pick up on Jael. Her family and the village - all her neighbours - were allied to the Canaanite King, and not Israel. Their loyalty was with the enemy of God but at great personal risk Jael chose to do God's will and not the enemies. Now the tent peg through the head doesn't at all sit well with me. It raises more questions than answers. In the light of the cross it's just not right. However, at the end of the day and at great risk, Jael chose obedience to God over the will of her family and neighbours.

It's somewhat similar with Sue who I mentioned earlier. Remember she became a Christian despite family opposition. Her and her family were aligned with the world and it's values. A world in opposition to God. A world warring with God. However Sue decided to obey God and it cost Sue her family. Now Jael, her husband and her village would be in a whole heap of trouble when the Canaanite king found out the second most important man in his kingdom had died at her hands. Yet Jael was obedient.

And not only this Jael even points to Christ. How, you ask? How could a tent peg through the head point to Jesus? Let me explain.

Way back in the Garden of Eden Satan tempted Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of a special tree. And they did. They disobeyed God. Sin and death then entered God's perfect creation and we've never been the same since. Yet, all was not lost. For God would win through and Satan one day would be vanquished - and in the Garden we're told how.

So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this...I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Genesis 3:14–15

God promises Satan will be defeated. God will send an offspring of a woman, that's Jesus, and though Satan will strike his heel, that's the cross, this offspring, Jesus, will do what? - he'll crush Satan's head.

Here, in Jael's act - horrible though it is - we see a shadow, an echo, of what will come. The offspring of a woman, Jael crushed the enemy of God, Sisera's, head. Later, the offspring of a woman, Jesus crushes the enemy of God, Satan's, head. Satan, the evil serpent put his fangs into Christ's heel by way of the cross - that ugly, painful, unimaginable death of being nailed to a unyielding rugged cross. Yet, on that third day God raised Jesus from the grave and so the serpent's head was crushed. In Jael's act we see the shadow of this victory on the cross.

So, what've learnt today? What've we seen? Well, we've seen the rise of Barak as judge. And we must admire his faith leading God's people against the Canaanites and overwhelming odds. But this victory slips into the shadows, pushed to the side in the light of two women. Both held up in the God's Word as heroes. Deborah who effectively led God's people and who challenges our notions of leadership in the church today. And more perplexing, Jael, whose act appalls us, yet at great risk chose to be loyal to God rather align her family against God.

In all this, in a most unexpected way, this grim story points to the work of the cross and the crushing of Satan. And least we forget, the cross was grim. No matter how we sanitise and play down the physical torture of the cross - let us remember what Christ did for you and me. That he suffered and died so you and I might be God's dearly loved children, brought at great price. Cherished with much affection in the very Father heart of God. Amen.