

## **SERMON: 1 September 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **“A Season in Judges: Deborah, a Mother for Israel”**

**(Judges 4:1-16; 5:1-9 and Psalm 84:9-12)**

In the people of God's journey into the Promised Land and their establishment of a homeland, as described in the Books of Joshua and here in the Book of Judges, we come across an endless cycle of violence and peace - Israel did evil - the Lord lets them go - there is opposition, war, conflict, oppression as a result - Israel cries to the Lord for help - the Lord raises up heroic leaders known as judges - they lead Israel to success in battle - there is peace in the land for a period - Israel did evil again and the circle completes and the endless cycle continues.

I think these stories in the Book of Judges are tribal origin stories written by later historians eager to establish the people of God as the nation of Israel composed of 12 very different tribes under the one God and their conquest of Canaan. And so there are 12 different hero stories in the book.

Last week we looked at Samson, the hero origin story of the tribe of Dan. Next week we'll come across Gideon, and the origin story of Manasseh. The Deborah accounts are the tribal stories for the tribes of Naphthali and Zebulun, proving that these tribes also played their part in the conquest of Canaan or as we might prefer to say, the making of the Promised Land.

Evidence for this might be because the stories are situated between Joshua, who is tasked with leading God's free people into Canaan as the Promised Land, and the Book of Kings which records the period where kings ruled Israel and later, Israel and Judah.

Judges is in that interim, messy stage of evolution, where all the bad stuff is being dealt with on the way to the kingdom of peace and righteousness and true freedom for all.

Which is why I think Canaan is a microcosm of the KOG which Jesus came to teach us about and launch into being.

There's further evidence of this for me in that if we look at the Hebrew language for Canaan we see the root-verb kana which can mean order from chaos, a blending together, or synchronous existence (note that conquest doesn't suggest the latter)

(Joshua J Mark, Ancient History Encyclopedia, <https://www.ancient.eu/canaan/>).

Now, I like to think this might point to, God's intention to bring order out of disorder and to blend together all things into the Kingdom of God, in Christ and through Christ.

It's a recognition of what theologians call panentheism as opposed to pantheism. Pantheism means everything is God and God is everything whereas panentheism as you might have guessed, means everything is in God as God is in everything.

Panentheism recognises that everything carries the Divine DNA, the Divine Spark of Life, and it's from that commonality that God brings together and blends together God's kingdom. The kingdom of God is within you, said Jesus. And his prayer is that we be in God the Father and in him as he is in us. Panentheism.

But what's this got to do with Deborah and the cycle of violence in Israel's history?

Firstly, if its true that God's kingdom is now breaking through in the midst of this imperfect world, then we can see that it is doing so, not with violence but through the power of love.

Secondly, whilst God chose to speak through prophets and judges in the past, like Deborah, the writer to the Hebrews tells us that in these last days God has spoken through his Son, Jesus (Hebrews 1:2).

And what did Jesus speak about? The Kingdom of God. Luke tells us that in the 40 days when the Risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, the thing he spoke about was the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

And what was it that Jesus wanted his followers to do but to establish this kingdom by making disciples, baptising them and obeying what Jesus had taught (Matthew 28:19).

And thirdly, the Judges accounts, like Deborah's serve to emphasis that violence only leads to an endless repeating cycle of more and more violence. It could only be arrested by God becoming incarnate and taking onto himself the weight of this world's violence and ending it in love. Christ Jesus modelled perfect non violence. He showed the way to absorb the hatred and called his followers to meet violence, not with more violence, but with love.

As we saw last week Walter Wink says in his book *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (2003),

"Love of enemies has, for our time, become the litmus test of authentic Christian faith. Love of enemies is the recognition that the enemy, too, is a child of God."

Like the messiness of the making of the Promised Land some 3,000 years ago, the kingdom of God advances with the pains and the mess of new birth.

Loving enemies is tough and can be messy. Following Christ is tough and sometimes messy. But we've got to believe that somehow in the mess of it all, God is fashioning an everlasting kingdom marked by perfect peace and justice, where the tears of this world will have watered the plants and the trees of the one to come.

Fourthly, the Deborah account confirms the place of women as equal to men in a time where gender equality was not considered. With Deborah seen as both a prophet and a judge, we see that God's intention was, and is, for women to be functioning at every level in the Promised Land and in the Kingdom of God.

With his 900 iron chariots, Commander Sisera may have commanded the latest state of the art weaponry of his day like having an arsenal of nuclear weapons, but he disregarded Jael because she was a woman. And he paid the price for doing so.

I'm not suggesting that gender equality means men end up with tent pegs through their skulls, as happened to Commander Sisera. But if we suppress one gender in favour of another we risk missing out on what God might say and do.

After all, scholars reckon that Deborah was possibly the first prophet, judge to make use of the phrase, "the Lord, the God of Israel", the God who she described in the ancient Song of Deborah as the God who marches ahead of us and throws enemies into disarray (Judges 5:6,14,15).

And so to finish, I want to make mention of that name for God which Deborah introduced us to. The Hebrew name is Yahweh (YHWH). It's the name God gives Moses to take to the Israelites when they ask who sent him. It literally means, I am or I will be or better still I am becoming, from the root verb to become.

This is a healthy way to think of God and God's kingdom. If God is content to be known as the God who is becoming then there is a sense that God, and God's Kingdom, is not yet complete. It is becoming. You and I are becoming. Together, we are becoming.

God is bringing order out of our chaos, light out of our darkness, wholeness out of our brokenness.

I listened to something on the radio this week that encouraged me to want to keep going despite sometimes feeling like things are not just messy but

sometimes feel like a bit of a slog or really frustrating. The presenter was reminding me that it's sometimes in the midst of the frustration and the slog, when you don't feel like you're making any progress at all, that you stumble upon fascination and wonder.

He gave the example of having to drive for hours on a long journey and it feeling like a slog so he broke the journey and dragged himself into a service station where he ended up having a life affirming conversation with the only other person that was in that service station at the time. He suddenly realised what a privilege it was that he had a journey to make, that he had something to work towards; and so he discovered a joy in that inner realisation, that something in him was leading him on through the journey that he just had to make. He knew he couldn't give up even though others would have done so. He knew the journey was leading somewhere.

We might say, he was becoming something more, just as we are becoming something more. We are unfinished creatures in the process of being created anew in love. We get to play our part in the becoming of God's kingdom until Christ is all and in all .

Even though its often messy, let's keep going and let's trust the Spirit, who is leading us, in the way of love, to help create and establish greater things.