

## **SERMON: Sunday – 12 March 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **God's Strength in Our Weakness**

Judges 16:6-21

John 4:7-15

When thinking about the story of Delilah its helpful to have some context. The story takes place in a period of lawlessness in the history of God's people. The Book of Judges several times uses the refrain,

*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.*

Indeed that is the very last verse in the book.

Not that having a king helped them of course. Their only king was only ever meant to be the God who made them and loved them.

Samson is one of a series of judges who are there to help to guide God's people and in the main the judges were good at that but not always.

The Jews and the Philistines were deadly enemies. For 40 years Judah had been under Philistine rule, and Samuel is introduced (Judges 13), before his conception never mind his birth, as the divinely appointed hero who will defeat the enemy and restore his people's freedom.

Samson was born to a man and woman who had been unable to have children until the angel of the Lord appears to them and promises them a child who was to be a Nazirite, in other words, dedicated to the Lord from birth, a rescuer for God's people, who's hair was never to be cut, as a sign of this promise.

Samson grows up to do some incredible feats with the help of the Spirit of God. But amongst other failings, he has a weakness for foreign women. He's a gambler who sets riddles for a bet. He's an impetuous man with anger issues, which at times causes him to lash out with tragic consequences.

Like us all he definitely had a weak spot which landed him in trouble.

Samson, the long awaited chosen one, fell for a Philistine woman and insisted on marrying her despite his parents' protests.

As one commentator put it recently,

“The anointed one was no saint, but a spoiled brat whose sense of self-importance was matched neither by his intellect nor by his common-sense. A superficial reading of the story might confirm the impression that strongman hero Samson was duped by a conniving foreign woman, Delilah. This is, after all, a Jewish tale preserved in Jewish holy scriptures for Jewish readers who would have no difficulty believing the worst of the hated Philistines. (But) Delilah (is an) intelligent woman in an impossible situation doing the best she can for herself and her people.

We are told that Samson was ‘in love’ with Delilah, which, on past form, means simply that he wanted, and was determined to have her. There is no suggestion that his feelings were reciprocated.

Delilah, a mere woman, was under pressure both from Samson and from the Philistine leaders who saw Samson’s infatuation with one of their womenfolk as an opportunity to bring him down.

Delilah was offered a vast amount of money to betray him. Why would she not accept it? It was her patriotic duty, never mind being to her own advantage.

After two failed attempts, Delilah gets the truth out of Samson, that shaving his head, thus causing him to break his Nazirite vow, would bring an end to his supernatural strength, and she has no hesitation in doing what she has to do.

And among the last words written about him describe the result of his famous hair cut, when his life’s vow is broken:

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“His strength departed. The Lord had left him”. (16:20) and “he died with the Philistines” (16:30).

His Strength, his Lord had departed because Samson had broken off the relationship. He’d folded under the weight of temptation. He’d caved in under pressure.

Which begs the question, how do we cope when the heat is on? How are we when tempted to say or do the wrong thing? Where are our weak points? Are we aware of them so as to try avoiding being brought down by them? Are there people or places or situations we need to be careful with?

But back to Samson. There is not really a lot of good to speak of in Samson. He is a liar and a misogynist. He pays little attention to his Nazirite vows, has no concern for the people and is deeply selfish. Delilah calls him out on this. Yet, it is Samson who has become a ‘favourite’ character in the bible; a hero of sorts when he seems to deserve none of that. It is Delilah who appears to be the more heroic.

The problem with the Samson tradition is that might and power seem to win and not compassion and wisdom which you would have thought would be necessary in being a leader. Samson affirms a kind of leadership that is all about winning and asserting power over others.

Delilah perhaps has more appropriate characteristics for leadership, yet she is the one who has been unfairly spun as both cunning and manipulative.

The foreigner, Philistine woman, Delilah, is set alongside the unnamed Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at a well. Once again we are challenged to put aside our preconceptions and see the humanity in someone who would have been regarded as below contempt by her own people, the Samaritans, for her immoral lifestyle, let alone by any normal Jewish man.

Jesus was not any normal Jewish man, however. And here we have both Jesus and the woman in need at the well.

Jesus needed what she had to give him—a drink of water—and knew that her life would be transformed by what he could offer her—a fresh start in life and a renewed sense of her own worth.

Both were thirsty. Jesus in a physical way and the woman in a spiritual way.

Thirsting is a big part of what's going on in that encounter. Water is so necessary to our survival. It's the thing we humans need most for life. Without water, our bodies will begin to shut down and we will die of thirst.

And without the living water then our souls will never be at rest. We will keep looking here and there for meaning and purpose and contentment and fulfillment.

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Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;

(Isaiah 55:1)

I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life.

(Revelation 21:6)

All we need bring is our thirst, our longing.

Both Delilah's mother - only ever referred to as the wife of Manoah - and the also unnamed Samaritan woman had that in common. They both had a thirst. Both, we're told, were waiting for the Messiah who would bring an end to the barren-ness and satisfy their longings (Judges 13:2; John 4:25).

And the Source of Life-Giving Water will not disappoint us whether we're Jew or Samaritan, insider or outsider, women or men, girls or boys.

Jesus said,  
'whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst'  
(John 4:14)

This week saw International Women's Day and so it seems appropriate to be thinking mostly about women of faith.

When I was at New College studying theology, I was able to study church history and was amazed at some of the stories of faith in the generations since the death and resurrection of Jesus. And many of the stories that struck me most were stories of faithful women.

For example, some Christians around the world remember this week, two heroic sisters of faith who are believed to have died on March 7, 203. Their names were Perpetua and Felicity.

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The relationship between Perpetua and Felicity began as that of a noblewoman and her servant girl. But when they embraced Christ, they became soul-sisters and ultimately co-martyrs.

Perpetua managed to keep a diary in prison which has become one of the most widely studied texts from that period in history (Late Antiquity).

In 203 AD, at the Roman military games in celebration of Emperor Septimius Severus's birthday, the authorities arrested six Christians and condemned them to death by the sword for their refusal to renounce their faith.

Among these six were twenty-two-year-old Perpetua, who had a young child, and her former servant, Felicity, who was eight months pregnant.

Felicity gave birth while in prison, the night before their execution date, and her child was entrusted to a Christian couple. Eyewitness accounts document that just before their death, the two women, now equals in Christ, embraced one another with a holy kiss. They were put to death along with the others at Carthage, in modern day Tunisia.

Their refusal to renounce their faith stands in sharp contrast to that of the supposed hero, Samson. And yet it's the Samsons we remember before the Perpetuas or Felicitys.

Male bias is still an issue today. Only this week, The Scottish Parliament was debating the reform of the criminal law to address misogyny. This isn't a problem that can be said to be confined to the annals of history.

But despite this obvious male bias in the Scriptures we have two big things to point out.

Firstly, despite this bias in the Scriptures, we have Jesus constantly countering it and time and time again pointing to women, at least as much as men, as being heroes of faith.

In a time when it wasn't kosher, he had women followers. He met with women, even women who others would have nothing to do with. And because he did, he changed women's lives.

When he met women, he comforted them, spoke up for them, healed them, raised them up, gave them their rightful place, treated them with dignity, respect and with equality. He made the world a safer place for women to be part of.

Because he is God, who does not show favouritism but treats all equally.

And secondly, despite the male bias in the Scriptures, and the erring of male figures like Samson, God still worked through them, weak as they were like Samson.

We see in the end of Samson's life story there was a victory - ok maybe not a perfect one but a victory of sorts, a foretaste of a greater victory to come at Easter and beyond.

A victory that Jesus would be part of it. And so would Perpetua and so would Felicity. And so will we.

Because God uses human weakness, works through our lack of strength, our lack of success, our failures and even through our human error.

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God's power is made perfect in human weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Most perfectly in the way of the cross walked by Jesus unto death.

When we are weak he is strong.

All we need do, is to keep turning to this God in our weakness with a thirst that God alone can, and will, eternally satisfy.