

SERMON: 15 September 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper
“A Season in Judges: Jephthah the Reckless”
(Judges 11:1-10, 29-49 and John 16:1-8)

I think in this sermon I want to contrast the god of jephthah with the God of Jesus.

Listen to first part of the Jephthah story from The Message.

34-35 Jephthah came home to Mizpah. His daughter ran from the house to welcome him home—dancing to tambourines! She was his only child. He had no son or daughter except her. When he realized who it was, he ripped his clothes, saying, “Ah, dearest daughter—I’m dirt. I’m despicable. My heart is torn to shreds. I made a vow to God and I can’t take it back!”

36 She said, “Dear father, if you made a vow to God, do to me what you vowed; God did his part and saved you from your Ammonite enemies.”

37 And then she said to her father, “But let this one thing be done for me. Give me two months to wander through the hills and lament my virginity since I will never marry, I and my dear friends.”

38-39 “Oh yes, go,” he said. He sent her off for two months. She and her dear girlfriends went among the hills, lamenting that she would never marry. At the end of the two months, she came back to her father. He fulfilled the vow with her that he had made.

In verse 35,

Ah, dearest daughter—I’m dirt. I’m despicable. My heart is torn to shreds

the Hebrew verb *kara* means to bow down or to be brought to one’s knees. That’s more fitting than some translations of the verse which say, for example in the NLT, that the daughter has somehow “destroyed” him. The NIV does a good job here with, “You have brought me down and I am devastated”.

Following a reckless vow, Jephthah is rightly brought to his knees, perhaps for the first time. Though Jephthah is described as a great warrior and a hero in

Israel; along with Gideon, Barak and Samson, he's one of only 4 judges mentioned in Hebrews 11 but we're not told much about his relationship with God. We know he made at least one vow. We know that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him to lead an army over his enemies.

We know that he was an illegitimate 'son of (the land of) Gilead', whose mother was a prostitute and whose genealogy meant he was a grandson of Manasseh and great grandson of Joseph. We know he was despised by his half brothers, supposedly because of his illegitimate status, a result of the sins of his own father.

As a result of being outlawed by his family, we know that he ran away and gathered around him a mob of worthless rebels. He became what the Oxford Commentary calls a 'social bandit' surrounded by other 'uprooted fighting men'.

And he must have soon gained a reputation as a hardened warrior as the elders of Gilead send for Jephthah when the Ammonites attack Israel.

You can see there's lots in Jephthah's background to keep psychologists busy for years. Imagine what his home life must have been like. All that childhood trauma brought on by his father's indiscretion. Even though we know him as making a reckless vow, you can't help feel a wee bit sorry for his early start in life. Is this the reason for Jephthah's folly all these years later?

Certainly all these factors had a hand in making Jephthah the man he became. And, helped to build an image of God for Jephthah the was less than perfect.

He falls into the temptations to gain adulation and misuse power. We can see that from verse 15 of chapter 11, when Jephthah issues a decree with no reference to what the Lord says. The message starts, "this is what Jephthah says". In other words, Jephthah's word is central. There is no mention of Jephthah humbling himself and seeking the Lord.

Why then does the Spirit of the Lord come upon him later? Because God is gracious and because we are all a mixture of saint and sinner, good and bad, light and shadow. It's Jephthah's shadow side that is coming out.

And as if the incident with his daughter isn't bad enough. Chapter 12 records Jephthah fuelling a conflict with his brotherly tribe, the Ephraimites, which results in inter tribal war and the death of 42,000 Ephraimites. Was that the Lord's work? No.

[SLIDE] Some of us will have read or seen Margaret Atwood's dystopian depiction of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Gilead is a place where women are the property of men and a strict rule based society is created supposedly as a pure place of God's reign. But you can't help ask the question, who's god is this?

That's not the god Jesus shows us. That's not even the god that the Bible reveals. That god is a false idol made up by men.

Under his eye. May the Lord open. Go in grace. All sound like great godly terms of endearment but in the context of the State of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, you can't help wincing every time you hear these phrases because they are meaningless words spoken in order to keep up appearances and backed by little or no authenticity.

But that's not to say God is not present in Gilead. God is there, in the unexpected and in the unlikely.

[SLIDE] Likewise in the Jephthah story. Jephthah's image of God is flawed but God is present not least in the response of his daughter and her willingness to lay down her life in order to see the promise kept.

As Jephthah falls to his knees for perhaps the first time and is completely undone, there is hope that his image of God can start to be rebuilt. Does he see God in his daughter's unhesitating obedience?

All of this serves to speak to us, I think, of the need to develop a healthy image of God in our worship together. And to recognise, that our actions are shaped by our image of God.

Jesus prepared his followers for times when people would do things to them thinking they were doing it for God.

[SLIDE] “When anyone kills you, they will think they are doing a holy duty for God,” he said in John 16:2.

[SLIDE] Richard Rohr said this recently, “God and religion, I am afraid, have been used to justify most of our violence and to hide from the shadow parts of ourselves that we would rather not admit.”

It’s not just suicide bombers who do violent things in the name of a god they have imagined. People can say hurtful and harsh things claiming that their god is behind the words.

It all stems from the image of god that they have created or imagined.

[SLIDE] Look for a minute at the image of god Jephthah had:

Delights in male power

Leads people into war

Accepts human sacrifice

Is to be feared

Demands vows are not broken (see Deuteronomy 23:12-3)

We all have an image of God and we need to have that image built up healthily. And Jesus has shown us most truly the way to that image. It’s that image of God that we need to contemplate, meditate on, read about, sing about and talk about and follow.

And its the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, that leads people into all truth.

[SLIDE] As John puts it, “He will show the world how wrong it was about sin, about who was really in the right, and about true judgment” (16:8).

[SLIDE] Again, as Richard Rohr puts it, “*(Jesus) did not come to change God’s mind about us. It did not need changing. Jesus came to change our minds about God—and about ourselves—and about where goodness and evil really lie.*”

Loving God, you made us in your image. Save us from making you in our image. Instead rebuild us and renew us, by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit. That we might truly become, the Body of Christ, living by the mind of Christ. In Jesus' name. Amen.