

Sermon

Delivered by Helen Garton at St Columba's on 26 August 2018

Readings:

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

Let us pray, using the words from Ephesians 6:19 and 20

Pray for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador. Amen.

The book of Joshua is a bit of a problem for us. It is an interesting book. My grandmother used to say “that’s interesting dear” when she wanted to shut down the conversation! And I would so love to take her words to heart and shut down the conversation. However, it is an appointed reading for today and there is some good stuff in it.

What is problematic about Joshua? Well, it’s a bit of a blood thirsty book. Joshua is, above all, a warrior and he believes that God has called him to, in effect, ethnically cleanse the Promised Land of Canaanites. We often get the more palatable edited highlights in the lectionary readings. And so it is here, because what we heard was Joshua’s farewell speech to the Israelites, as he is about to go (in the words of verse 14 NRSV) the way of all the earth.

He implores them to revere God and serve God in sincerity and faithfulness. But he gives them the choice also, if they are unwilling do so, then they can go off and turn their backs on the one true God. ‘As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’ Of course, it isn’t much of a choice, because a few verses earlier Joshua says ‘If you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God... and go and serve other gods and bow down to them... you shall perish quickly from the good land that God has given you.’ But it is a choice the Israelites can take.

Joshua started out as Moses’ assistant – when Moses goes up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, Joshua accompanies him. When Moses chooses one person from each of the 12 tribes of Israel to enter the Promised Land and report back. Ten of the spies urge the Israelites to retreat and go back to Egypt: only Joshua and Caleb stand firm. For that, God punishes the people by sending them back into the wilderness and declaring that none of that generation would enter the Promised Land.

At the end of his life, Moses appointed Joshua as his successor. There on in, Joshua fights his way into the Promised Land. On the way, his name is changed from Hoshea to Joshua... which is of no small significance for us. Joshua means ‘God saves’... and it is the same name given to Jesus, Jesuha, ‘God saves’ – no pressure, as we would say these days!

There is everything at stake when Joshua is tasked with getting the Israelites settled in the land of Canaan. And it's not just Joshua's reputation which is on the line, it is God's promise which is at stake and Joshua reflects this in his final speech, where he speaks about the history of God's dealings with the chosen people.

God makes a promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1, 15:17 and 17:8), that he will be the father of many nations and that his descendants will inherit the land. God makes a promise to Isaac (Gen 26:2-5) that he will give this land to his many descendants. God makes the same promise to Jacob (Gen 28:1-4, 13-15) and Joseph (Gen 48:3-4, 21) and to Moses he promises a land flowing with milk and honey.

Moses fails to bring the Israelites into the land of Canaan, when the people listen to the ten spies (and not Joshua and Caleb) and begin grumbling all over again, about how they were much better off as slaves in the land of Egypt. It is Joshua's task to put this right. His campaign is described as a Holy War against Canaan... to some of us no war is ever holy or just. And his task is essentially to ethnically cleanse Canaan of all non-Israelites... you see why the book of Joshua is troublesome... and it is of little comfort that there are still descriptions of non-Israelites living in the land after Joshua's campaigns.

All this is problematic and I can't explain it away or justify it. What I can do is take from it the lesson that is intended: the reason why the Canaanites lost the war was because of their wickedness, because they were unjust in their dealings with their own people. This is why, we are told, God backed Joshua, God says 'They have done what is evil in my sight.'

And yet Joshua's farewell speech is rooted in God's love. He reminds them of God's promises. He reminds them that God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. He reminds them that God provided for them in the wilderness. He reminds them that the land of Canaan is the one which God promised to them and their ancestors and that God is true to his promises. The people's only response to God's love and provision for them, is to revere God and serve God in sincerity and faithfulness. This is how we are to give thanks for life and for freedom. Choose!

Choose between reverence for God and serving other gods. The way is clear of course, there can be only one choice if you want life, but you are free to choose. If you turn away from the Lord your God, then you are (verse 22) witnesses against yourselves. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

So, that's nice and straightforward isn't it! Love and serve the Lord. This is the choice we all know that we need to make. As for me, I will serve the Lord. As for me and my church, we will serve the Lord. The choice has already been made. But then we get to John's gospel and it all starts to fall apart.

Over the last four or five weeks, we have been looking at Jesus as the Bread of Life. We began with the feeding of the 5000, bread for hungry people and we close with Jesus as the bread of life which comes down from heaven. We should have finished

with bread last week, but instead we have this rather curious reading from John's gospel in which we hear Jesus' despair.

He has taught, he has preached, he has performed miracles. He has explained his parables and his miraculous works. He has drawn the crowds. And still they want more. And still they don't believe. What more does he have to do to convince them? And the crowds turn around and go home and desert him. So, he turns to his disciples and says to them "Do you also wish to go away?"

I just love Peter's response: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." It's not exactly a ringing endorsement, is it. Sally and I have friends who have been together a long time now, which is a miracle considering how Nick proposed to his wife... and please don't try this at home. He said, "Are we going to get married then? After all, who else would have us?!" Peter's response is much the same, "Well who else is going to have us?" It's almost as if following Jesus is the best of a bad deal, except that Peter follows it up with, "You have the words of eternal life."

This phrase, "to whom can we go" has been rattling round my head for days. Friday was a really special day... I took part in my first same sex marriage, sharing the service with Nigel Appleton, it was fabulous. The young women had been looking for a church to call home and stumbled across Cumnor church when they had been walking their dog and decided to give it a go. As you can imagine, the folk at Cumnor took the couple to their hearts and a large number of them came to the wedding to support them. To whom could they go, but for a small number of churches who were prepared – no delighted – to celebrate their relationship and support them as they moved into a new phase?

To whom do you turn when you are rejected? Where do you go to hear the words of eternal life, when you are not made to feel welcome? Where do you go, when who you are does not fit with other people's definitions of acceptability?

The welcome we extend to everyone in both churches, we accept as normal. But perhaps we don't realise how radical that welcome, that acceptance is. Perhaps we don't realise just how pioneering we are and what a witness we offer, not just to other URCs who are thinking about same sex marriages, but to other denominations here in this country and around the world. We are making history and all eyes are on us.

One day, the welcome we offer to everyone and the acceptance and the love that we show will be the norm. but until that day, we have valuable work to do. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Why would we turn anyone away? Why would we turn anyone away because of sexuality, or gender, or because they are transitioning, or because they are differently abled? It is unthinkable. Why would we not welcome anyone into our fellowship? We are diminished when people are rejected, or they are not made to feel welcome; when they are not enabled to share

their gifts and talents and experiences. One size does not fit all, but one body, the body of Christ, has room for all.

During that same sex marriage at Cumnor URC, I sat there thinking about the first two weddings I conducted over twenty years ago. In both cases the women had been married before and both couples had been turned down by their local churches, because the priests refused to marry divorcees. Never mind that in both cases the women had got divorced on the grounds of domestic abuse. Never mind that the men they were marrying were lovely people in whom they had found happiness and healing. What right does the church have to turn people away. This is God's house, not ours.

To whom will people turn if we don't welcome them in? this is a house where there is bread to spare for everyone. God knows, it is hard enough. If the church turns people away, it betrays Christ.

John's gospel is interesting... not in my grandmother's use of the word interesting this time. It speaks about betrayal, but in an unexpected way. In John Jesus is not betrayed by Judas, instead he hands himself over to be crucified as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Betrayal in John is about not believing in abundant life. It is about there being more to this life than survival. There is more to living than getting and spending.

Betrayal is that which caused you to believe that this life is for everyone else but you... that church is for everyone but you. It is about anything and everything (and everyone) that makes you think that you are not the kind of person that Jesus could love. Rejection, marginalisation does that to you. Love is about belonging, mutuality, reciprocity, nurture, safety... real relationship. Real, abundant life is hard to accept, it is hard to believe that it is for you and for me. It goes deep into you soul. Perhaps this is why the crowds turn away from Jesus and go home. It is about much more than bread. Betrayal is about not being able to enter into a relationship with Christ. It is about not wanting to be known. It happens when we sabotage ourselves before we get too close to God... when we walk away. It is a gift that is hard to receive. It is the gift we can give when people walk through the doors of this church: come, you are welcome here, you belong here, you are a part of us and we with you.

Jesus is the bread of life which comes from heaven. Take and eat, receive Christ into your life. And his lifeblood which he shed for us is the source of eternal life, offered for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Amen.

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