

BFPC - Sunday 28 October 2007

Rev Rosy Coldwell

'Joshua and the Promised Land'

Joshua 6:1-11, 15-16, 20

Philippians 1:12-21

We have been journeying through hundreds of years of Biblical history over the last few weeks; thinking about the Bible being God's fantastic love letter to us... how God spoke to our forefathers... how the Bible is the primary source through which God speaks to his people and builds up a love relationship with them. We have been trying to get the Big Picture.

Geographically we have travelled with Abraham from his original homeland which is where Iraq is now, to the top of the mountains of Ararat floating in Noah's Ark, to Egypt with Joseph where the Israelites became a nation, across the Red Sea with Moses and through the desert to the edge of the River Jordan.

Again and again, through his chosen leaders, God has been showing his people that he is a just and holy God and hates sin but that he loves his creation and wants to save and redeem them. The leaders he chose were far from perfect but learned obedience to God's commands over the years, sometimes through their own bitter experiences. They were then ready to be prototype saviours to the Israelite people.

These saviours passed on the lessons to the Israelites that God, although just and holy, was not going to give up on his people, that he was prepared to forgive them each time they strayed away from his laws, and give them another chance if they promised to try and follow those laws and to trust him.

The people were learning two aspects of God's nature - his 'close, comforting presence and his awesome, fearsome glory'. They were to become a holy people and to reveal God's laws to other nations around them. Lasting peace and prosperity in the land God had promised them depended 'not on military might but on walking according to God's ways'.

And now Joshua, a military leader who had been Moses' assistant for years, who had witnessed the crossing of the Red Sea and travelled with Moses through the desert, was to be the next leader of the Israelites. He was aware of God's 'calling to the new - the next step'. God had been raising him up to be leader when the people were ready to move on, geographically and spiritually. This pattern emerges throughout the Old Testament and is often still true for us today...

Joshua had an enormous task ahead of him. At the beginning of Joshua chapter 1 God several times encouraged him to be 'strong and very courageous'. He is to be 'resolute, firm and determined, keeping his eyes on the 'Book of the Law' continually'. It was time to realize the very great promises made to Abraham all those hundreds of years before... that is, for the people to take possession of the Promised Land and become a great nation.

If Joshua was obedient in this way, then God promised to set up and exalt him as leader by revealing his plan and power to Joshua ahead of the events as it were. These plans included causing the waters of the River Jordan to stop flowing so the people could cross on dry ground, and then causing the walls of Jericho to collapse. And so Joshua told the people to consecrate themselves to the Lord and to remember all his promises, and to keep remembering all that He had done for them in the past; and then the Lord would do amazing things for them...

In the Hebrew worldview these 'amazing things' or 'wonders' are events which are 'extraordinary', 'direct or indirect acts of God'; which happen 'as announced, when needed, and for a purpose'.

If you have an Old Testament map you will see that, on crossing the Jordan, the Israelites would have looked straight at Jericho! 'If they had tried to skirt round it they would always have been intimidated by it'. They all had to be 'strong and very courageous' and to obey God's instructions very precisely, and then God would keep his side of the bargain...

When you think about it, what kind of military strategy is it - to tell your entire army to keep quiet for six days and on the seventh to shout?! The only noise to be heard was the priestly trumpets!!

We may sing 'Joshua fought the battle of Jericho', but more correctly, it was the Lord.

Even though it could be argued that Joshua's army was employing psychological warfare, this second, dramatic, and amazing wonder showed both Israel and the rest of the land that Joshua had victory, not because of superior military strength, but because the Lord was with him.

You may be thinking that it was pretty tough justice meted out to the citizens of Jericho, and later on to other peoples that Joshua and his army fought and conquered. But all the people in the land of Canaan had become extremely corrupt, with corrupt religion and morality involving tin pot gods, the sacrificing of their own children etc etc.

God had given the people of the earth a very long time to repent and to follow his laws, since the time of Noah's ark in fact. But when they didn't, God's judgement was inevitable. Think how long the Egyptians had, and Pharaoh in particular, to obey God and let the Israelites go... But they didn't... and had to pay the price.

The Israelites and their leaders were to be aware, as we must be that there is a spiritual battle going on. Any compromise can have disastrous consequences, as we learn in the story of Achan in chapter 7 of Joshua.

God had taught the Israelites his laws through Moses and Joshua, and they were to demonstrate in their lives that God was the one true God who demanded absolute obedience. He, in his turn, would protect and deliver them and provide for their needs...

So how did Jericho fall and the Israelites conquer? Answer - by listening to God's voice.

And here's the challenge for us. It is one that Tim mentioned right at the beginning of this series of sermons and I quote, "If we fail to accept the claims the Bible makes for itself, we doubt God and we cloud our ability to hear him speak. If we accept the claims that the Bible makes then we have no excuse not to have it as the primary source of our understanding of our faith".

That means taking on board those same laws that the Israelites were given; laws of loving, obeying and trusting God with all our hearts, believing that Jesus fulfilled all those laws perfectly, following him and listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit who helps us to obey those laws and to take strongholds..

Just before the weekend away Tim encouraged us all to come together and pray and to consecrate ourselves to the Lord, and then to believe that the Lord could do amazing things for us as a church. I believe that some amazing things have happened but there are still many strongholds for all of us to take.

What then are our Jerichos?

In private life it may be bad habits, excessive worry, destructive relationships, long term illness or pain.

In church life it may be lack of love, lack of giving and sharing, or jealousy over positions that others hold, or thinking that we are inadequate and have nothing to give, or fear of how to communicate the Gospel to a hostile world outside of the Church.

In countries it may be oppressive regimes that persecute Christians and people of other faiths, or greed and dishonesty in business and government.

But let us thank God for the faithful members of this congregation who have prayed faithfully, and trusted God, and already seen some strongholds taken, the walls of Jericho falling down in Blandford Forum...Let us keep listening to each other, especially to those with the prophetic voice of experience who recognize what other strongholds there are; or who may give a voice of caution - to wait God's moment, his Kairos so that we can march straight in and take possession.

There will be times when we are afraid, when we can't seem to overcome difficulties or sin in our own lives, let alone witness for Christ to those around us ... when the walls of Jericho in front of us seem massively tall and imposing because so many are faithless and because the world is becoming a darker place to live in. There is nothing wrong with feeling fear and acknowledging our weakness. It is then that we can allow the Lord to come in and help us to be strong in him. Listen to St. Paul speaking to the Corinthians,

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way- disputes without and fears within.

In our second reading today we heard about his time in prison. But it became a time when others were emboldened to preach the Gospel, perhaps because they saw that Paul was unafraid even in those circumstances. He of all people learned to trust God in every circumstance, to die to himself, to live for Christ, and to see how his times of vulnerability were turned to the Gospel's advance.

'The paradox of God's victory in situations of apparent weakness is seen above all in the death and resurrection of Jesus himself' whose supreme example we follow.

So let us not lose heart. We are God's people in this town of Blandford which is God's town, and in the villages around which are his also.

We cannot break down our personal strongholds or win people over for God in our own strength. God has not asked us to. He has just asked us to trust him, to listen to his Holy Spirit, to pray for the faith and courage to be his witnesses to our neighbours and friends when he gives us the signal and the opportunity.

Then we can say, as Joseph said to Pharaoh, and as all the other Old Testament leaders believed - Abraham, Noah, Moses, Joshua - "I cannot do it...but God will".