

Deborah and Jael

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Reverend Rebecca Newland

25 September 2011

Judges 4:1-10

Well guess what I am going to preach about today?!

Not about talents and money.

Not servants who don't seem to be able to manage what they are given.

Not about the capitalist economy, it's inequality and oppressive and harsh rulers, which is what I think the parable of the talents is actually about. The parable is not about God and how we are going to be in deep trouble if we don't use God's blessings well. However I will leave that explanation for another day.

I am not going to preach about a community working together to achieve great outcomes - but well done everyone!! What a fantastic fair! It was so good seeing everyone working together. Newcomers to St Philip's and old hands at these events. As I went around the tables many, many, people commented what a fantastic fair we put on. A couple of blogs eating curry and drinking beer said, "best fair in the district".

But back to the sermon.

Since this is the only time in three years when we get to hear this story I am going to preach about Mrs Lappidoth, that would be Deborah, and Mrs Heber, that would be Jael. Stories of women leaders are few and far between so I don't think we should overlook these two remarkable woman.

On Deborah some commentaries I read said, yes, yes, it is remarkable that it was a woman who lead the Israelites at this point but it is not really about her, it is really about God. They are right of course but it sounds a bit like they do not want to let anyone get ideas above their station. Firstly they say it is extraordinary that a woman could do these things and secondly, it's not really about them anyway, it's all about God, no doubt a male father God at that. Of course scripture is primarily about God and the revelation of God's purpose and love and of course it is extraordinary that the hero of this story is a woman, but not because she is a woman. It is remarkable because her story has survived. A story about a mortal woman leader has survived for over a three thousand years. In fact the Song of Deborah, which appears in the next chapter, is one of the oldest parts of the Hebrew scriptures.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the Book of Judges and Deborah so I will set the scene, tell you her story and then reflect on what that means for we 21st century Christians.

The history of the Book of Judges is about the continuing settlement of the land of Canaan after the death of Joshua. It is a collection of stories centered around people, called judges, who are called by God to deliver the Israelites in times of crisis. There is no united Kingdom, only collection collections of tribes who come together to fight a common adversary, but otherwise go their own separate ways. The stories are very colourful, covering all areas of life. There is a smorgasbord of "political intrigue and assassination, lies and deception, rape and murder, courage and fear, great faith and idolatry, power and greed, sex and suicide, love and death, military victories and civil war".

Amazingly of the 12 judges mentioned Deborah is the only judge who is seen in a completely positive way. Even Gideon the great warrior leader became a source of idolatry and Samson as we know was a notorious womanizer. Much more brawn than brain. Deborah was also serving as

a judicial officer, a person who settled disputes and guided those who came to her for advice, before she was called to serve in a military capacity. All the other judges were military leaders who arise out of “nowhere” to lead the people to victory. So this person is truly remarkable.

So what type of leader is Deborah? Well she is very gifted with the power of insight. She is extraordinarily brave. She is wise. She listens to God and is faithful to God’s call. We hear that she sits under a palm tree between the towns of Ramah and Bethel and the people would come to her for help and decisions. I like to think of her, sitting in that shady spot, praying, contemplating, being open to God’s word and wisely guiding and helping. We pick up her story when she summons Barak, one of the military commanders, and gives him the message she has from God.

At this time a foreign King—King Jabin of Canaan—was oppressing the Israelites people. In fact this round of oppression had been going on for 20 years. King Jabin had an army commander, Sisera, who was fearsome enough to inspire terror in the heart of the bravest person. According to Jewish Midrash, traditional teaching on the Hebrew scriptures, he was a giant of a man. It is said that he could freeze a lion in its tracks just by screaming at it and he could destroy the walls of an enemy’s city with a shout. And again according to Jewish Midrash, Deborah was the only person who could withstand his voice. He had 900 iron chariots and the Israelites had none. And it is said that it took 900 fire-breathing horses to pull those chariots.

Deborah called Barak to her palm tree and told him in words he could not ignore.

Here is an edited version of their conversation:

Barak: (to Deborah) I understand you want a word with me.

Deb: Yes that’s right. . The Lord God of Israel has given you this command. He says you are to take ten thousand men and go to mount Tabor where you will fight Jabin’s great army.

Barak: You’ve got to be joking! Do you know what that army is like? They have got iron chariots and they have got a really good commander-you know—what’s his name?

Deb: Sisera. Yes I know all that but God has said you’ll win.

Barak: Look- I’ll go if you’ll go.

Deb: Don’t be silly.

Barak: No if you don’t go I won’t go.

Deb: All right I’ll go. But you’re going to look pretty silly I don’t mind telling you when the commander of the army, Sisera, gets handed over to a woman.

When we read the story we think she is talking about herself but in fact the person who ends up killing Sisera is another woman called Jael. After he loses the battle with the forces of Barak and Deborah, Sisera runs away. He seeks shelter at the tent of Jael who he thinks is on his side but she kills him by driving a tent peg through his skull.

In this tale it is these two women who are the focus of the story. One was a judge who commanded an army and the other was a resourceful nomad who felled a giant. Both women are celebrated in Jewish history and midrash. After the defeat of Sisera we find the repetitive refrain that tells us that the land had rest for forty years.

Reading the Book of Judges is not for the faint hearted. I don’t think it is a book you should look at to get the definitive answer on what God is like. You cannot do that with any of the books of the bible. God cannot be contained in one story, one era, one theology. That’s why we have 66 books instead of one. And all books must be read through the lens of Jesus Christ, Son of God, who lived and taught compassion, mercy, forgiveness and non-violence.

But what this story in Judges does is open our eyes to the fact that any person, woman or man, can do things we would consider unlikely or impossible. It opens our eyes to the fact that God can and will raise up people from all walks of life to lead. The story of Deborah and Jael is violent and bloody but it is a story of revolution and rebellion. It is of course a pre-Christian story. We don't read this story to learn about appropriate loving actions. This story fits in the pre-history of Jesus ancestor David. It is long before the prophets. Long before either the Greek or Roman empire.

In these stories they get things wrong, sometimes they fail, but through God's grace and power they prevail.

You now when I was younger there were absolutely no decent female role models for leadership. Ancient myths and legends were full of beautiful woman being seduced by Gods and rescued by mortal men. Fairy stories were full of woman and girls being rescued by big, brave men. Sleeping Beauty was awoken with a kiss. Cinderella was rescued by royalty with a glass slipper. Popular culture kept up the same theme. Star Wars might have had Princess Leia who wasn't too bad. At least she could fire a blaster and hit a storm trooper but in the end we all know it was Luke and Han who blew up the death star and saved the day. And I think even the dwarf, hobbits, elf, wizard and warrior who made up the Fellowship of the Ring and saved Middle Earth were all male.

But there, right there in that ancient book the bible, one of the most patriarchal, anthropocentric texts we have, there is the story of Deborah who led her people and delivered the enemy into the hands of another woman Jael. As a woman rector I may not want to look to Deborah for how to lead a battle or to Jael for how to get the better of a giant but I can look to Deborah for the example of her faithfulness and courage. I can look to Jael for her resourcefulness and creativity.

In the end, male or female, we can all play our part in saving the day. There is nothing impossible with God.