

Josh 5:13-6:27
Tim Anderson 2/11/20

If you are old enough,
and that is a good many of you,
you may well have sung this song at Sunday School.
"Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho.
Joshua fought the battle of Jericho,
and the walls came tumbling down."
But I want to tell you today
that your Sunday School teacher had it wrong.
Joshua did not fight the battle of Jericho.
Yahweh fought the battle of Jericho.
And the walls came tumbling down.

You heard the Bible reading.
There really isn't much evidence of Joshua fighting.
The fighting is done by Yahweh.
Joshua and his army do a bit of a mopping up operation.
But by that stage,
Yahweh has already destroyed the walls of Jericho
and completely demoralised its inhabitants.
Yahweh does the bulk of the work
and Joshua just completes the finishing touches.
And that's important.
One almost universal characteristic of the human condition
is to have an inflated view of our own importance
in the scheme of things.
Ministers do it.
The way we talk,
you'd think that everything good that happens in our churches
is as a result of our brilliance and hard work.
But actually its God's brilliance and the hard work of the lay people.
Politicians do it.
The way they talk,

you'd think that the economy rises and falls purely on the flow of their rhetoric.

It couldn't possibly be that the Australian economy got into surplus because the Chinese were paying more for our coal and iron ore.

Heavens No.

It's about some tinkering around the edges initiated by a politician. Grandparents do it.

To hear some grandparents talk, you could believe the achievements of their grandchildren were personally the result of the grandparent's own effort. Or if not that, then at least the result of prowess that was inherited 100% from their side of the family.

Well it's boorish behaviour in a social setting.

But it's actually worse than that if you fail to recognise God at work.

Then it's not boorish, it's faith destroying and bordering on blasphemy.

God does the work.

That doesn't matter whether it's tearing down the walls of Jericho or building the church.

What does the apostle Paul say?

1 Cor 3:6 "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."

Well this is particularly hard if you are a slightly insecure person and you rely on other people telling you how wonderful you are for some sense of personal validation.

God does the work.

Remember that.

Well God helpfully gives Joshua a little reminder of that before he does the work.

He's just wanting to make absolutely sure

that when the walls come tumbling down,
that Joshua knows that he didn't make them come tumbling down,
God did.

Josh 5:13-14 "Now when Joshua was near Jericho,
he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him
with a drawn sword in his hand.

Joshua went up to him and asked,

'Are you for us or for our enemies?'

'Neither,' he replied, 'but as the commander of the army of Yahweh
I have now come.'"

Well that is one strange encounter!

When they do this story for children's Bibles,
this bit doesn't usually get included.

But what are we to make of it?

Well first of all, who is this 'commander of the Lord's Army'?

I think this is what theologians would call

'a pre incarnate appearance of Christ'.

That's big words for God the Son in human form
before he was born of Mary.

If you've been a regular at Holy Trinity over the last few months,
you will have heard sermons of Revelation.

Who commands the armies of the Lord on a white horse,
with a sharp sword coming out of his mouth?

Yes it is the Lord Jesus.

He commands the armies of the Lord.

These appearances are rare in the Old Testament,
but there are other occasions.

The three visitors to Abraham's tent
when he is told Sarah will have a baby.

The fourth figure in the furnace with the three friends
in the book of Daniel.

Now of course it's possible that it's an angel.

But there are good reasons to think it's Christ.

When else is someone told to take off their sandals
because they are on holy ground?

It was Moses at the burning bush.
And that was definitely an appearance of God to Moses.
Would an angel allow someone to fall face down in reverence?
What did the angel say in Revelation
when John fell facedown to worship him?
"Don't do that!"
We don't worship angels.
We worship God alone.
And here Joshua prostrates himself
before the commander of the Lord's army.
I'm pretty convinced that this is an appearance of Christ.
So what are we to make of it?
The message to Joshua is,
"You're not in charge here, I am."
I mean if you'd asked any of the Israelites,
"Who is the commander of the Lord's army?"
They would have said "Joshua".
So Christ appears as the commander of the Lord's army
in order to say 'not you, me'.
Why is this important?
Because we need to know that God does the work.
And that is particularly true when we are working for him.
Joshua was achieving the fulfilment of promises
God had made hundreds of years before.
No question he was working for God.
And when you work for God,
God does the work.

What does that mean for us?
I think it's mostly about keeping pride and insecurity away.
When things are going well,
it's not our clever strategies that win the victories,
it's the mighty hand of God.
When external success is elusive,
God is not necessarily punishing me because of unfaithfulness.

Though do tune in next week for the flip side of this one.
It may be that it's just not his time yet.

Well if God is the one doing the fighting,
why is Joshua there at all?

What is Joshua's job?

Joshua's job is the same as our job.

His job is to do as he's told.

He needs to faithfully carry out everything the Lord tells him to.

And to give it extra spice,

the Lord tells him to do things in a way
that must have seemed completely crazy.

March around the city for six days.

Every day do a lap of the city.

Blow your trumpets while you do it.

On the seventh day, march around seven times.

Blow your trumpets and shout.

The walls will fall down.

And you can go in and take the city.

People who try to get all scientific about it are missing the point.

You've probably heard the speculation.

The walls of the city had a resonant frequency -
a bit like an opera singer can smash a wine glass.

The trumpets got the right frequency and the walls fell down.

Well who knows?

But it's certainly not the point.

The point is that it's a strategy that in human terms is guaranteed to fail.

God always asks his people

to use strategies that would fail in human terms.

Why?

So that when they succeed we know that it's God working.

We proclaim Christ crucified,

a stumbling block to Jews,

and foolishness to Gentiles.

In human terms guaranteed to fail.

But God builds his church.
God does the work.
And a bit like last week,
when the ark was carried into the middle of the Jordan River,
here the ark has a prominent place
as the Israelites march around the city.
It's making the same point.
The ark represents God's presence.
God is present as his people march out to war.

I'm reading a book about Islam at the moment.
It was written about 20 years ago around the turn of the century.
The stories of Muslim brutality towards Christians,
particularly in Africa, are terrifying.
And the accounts of just how much money is flowing
from the oil rich Arab nations
to foster the spread of Islam in these impoverished African nations
is mind boggling.
How can the gospel of Jesus compete against a religion
that exploits those powerful human urges of fear and greed?
Each chapter contains some prediction of where Islam will be by 2020.
Alarming predictions.
Nigeria will be an Islamic state.
South Africa will be an Islamic state.
And yet, 20 years later,
I get on to Google
and look up how much progress Islam has actually made.
Not only have the predictions not come true,
Islam has made no progress in the last 20 years.
In country after country,
the proportion of Muslims is the same as it was 20 years ago.
This is despite tens of billions of dollars of Muslim oil money
and lots of violent militias trying to win people for Islam.
And what has Christianity used to compete?
The message of a crucified Saviour.

And the promise
that you too can take up your own cross if you follow him.
It seems like God's strategy should be a failure,
just like marching around walls blowing trumpets should be a failure.
But God guarantees that if we are obedient in following his methods,
he will take care of the results.
And that's the main take away from this passage.
God does the work.
God provides the methods.
God looks after the result.

But before I finish,
I want to spend some time talking about an issue
that is probably troubling some of you.
It's the issue of holy war.
When you talk with people about becoming Christians,
one of the issues they raise is,
"How could I worship a God
who commands the slaughter of innocent people?
I wouldn't become a Muslim
because they go in to churches in France and cut people's heads off.
What I read about the slaughter of the citizens of Jericho
is even worse than that.
It's ethnic cleansing like in the Balkan wars of the 1990s."
It is in fact why you probably haven't heard Joshua preached
while you've been an adult.
You read the stories in Sunday School.
They focused on the walls falling down
and conveniently forgot to mention the slaughter of the inhabitants.
And you haven't heard the stories taught since.
Christians tend to be a bit ashamed
of passages in the Bible that talk about holy war.
So let's talk about holy war.

1. The assumption is that holy war

involves the killing of innocent people.

Let's be very clear,

from God's perspective they are not innocent people.

In Lev 18, God is commanding his people not to behave in sexually perverse ways.

And his warnings finish with these words Lv 18:24-25

"Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways,

because this is how the nations

that I am going to drive out before you became defiled.

Even the land was defiled,

so I punished it for its sin,

and the land vomited out its inhabitants."

This are not innocent people.

They are people whose lifestyle is so depraved

that God thinks they have no place in the land.

And it's not just their sexual behaviour either.

Deut 18:9-12 says,

"When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you,

do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there.

Let no one be found among you

who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire,

who practices divination or sorcery,

interprets omens, engages in witchcraft or casts spells,

or who is a medium or a spiritist or who consults the dead.

Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord;

because of these same detestable practices

the Lord you God will drive out those nations before you."

So the Canaanites were into occult practices

as well as deviant sexual practices.

Far from being innocent people,

they were people richly deserving of God's judgement.

2. God's command to wipe out Jericho's residents

is not the same as his command

for all of the peoples the Israelites will conquer.

Some nations the Israelites can make an offer of peace with.
Other nations are to be entirely wiped out.

To understand the difference we need to read Dt 20.

Dt 20:10-11 "When you march up to attack a city,
make its people an offer of peace.

If they accept it and open their gates,
all the people in it shall be subject to forced labour
and shall work for you."

Well that's not quite how it goes for Jericho, is it?

They don't get any offer of peace.

Why?

Dt 20:15 "This is how you are to treat all the cities
that are at a distance from you
and do not belong to the nations nearby."

OK, so a peace offer for far off nations.

But what about nations close by?

Dt 20:16-17 "However, in the cities of the nations
the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance,
do not leave alive anything that breathes.

Completely destroy them -

the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perezites, Hivites and Jubusites -
as the Lord your God has commanded you."

So that's a pretty sharp contrast.

One group gets offered a peace treaty.

The other group gets wiped from the face of the earth.

So what is the reason?

Dt 20:18 "Otherwise, they will teach you
to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods,
and you will sin against the Lord your God."

It's pretty simple really.

We've read about

the detestable sexual and occult practices of the Canaanite nations.

God knows that his own people can't be trusted

to have temptation under their noses.

And if they started behaving like Canaanites,

then he would have to drive them out of the land too.
Matter of fact that's exactly what he did many hundreds of years later.
Holy War is about God setting aside a people
who will offer him pure worship.
And he doesn't want the detestable Canaanite practices
creeping in an provoking his wrath against his own people.

The other thing to say about holy war
is that it has no place in Christian practice.
The promise of God for his people in the Old Testament
was the Promised Land.
The promise of God for us is the new Jerusalem.
This is a spiritual home not an earthly home.
We don't need to wage a war to conquer it.
Jesus has already waged the war
and defeated sin and death on the cross.
So the promises of God that apply to us
could never be used to justify a holy war.
It's also true that the warnings of being lead astray by nations around us
don't apply to Christians either.
Because as Christians we have the Holy Spirit living in us,
we don't need to separate ourselves from ungodliness
in such an extreme way.
It's still good to be wise about who we spend time with,
what movies and other stuff we watch,
what we generally fill our minds with.
But instead of being afraid that the ungodly will lure us into temptation
instead we need to be on the lookout
for opportunities to lure them into becoming followers of Jesus.
That's the difference that a life empowered by the Holy Spirit makes.
So you might have read about various times in Christian history
when Christian people have engaged in 'holy war'.
The most notable is the crusades in the tenth to twelfth centuries.
This is always a mistake.
Holy war was appropriate for God's people entering into Canaan.

It's never appropriate for Christians.

Well hopefully that's cleared up some questions
that some of you might have had about holy war.

I'm happy to converse with you over the phone or by email
if you have more questions about it.

Though the nature of the book of Joshua means it will come up again.

But let's finish by remembering the main lessons of this chapter.

1. God does the work.

The commander of the armies of the Lord appeared to Joshua
to let him know that this is God's work.

2. God's work gets done God's way.

It might not look sensible to fight a battle by blowing trumpets.

It might not look sensible to preach a crucified messiah.

But God gives us the methods to use to do his work.

We need to be obedient like Joshua.

Do God's work, God's way.

And we can rely on God to look after the results.