

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2020

No 35

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

I wonder where life finds you at this time. Many congregations have returned to face-to-face services, while on-line services are still very common. We are learning to live with what we have coined “Covid-normal”, getting used to recording our names and contact details wherever we go, “socially distancing” and in many situations, washing or sanitising hands and wearing a facemask. The contrast between where we are in Australia, and so much of the rest of the world, is stark indeed, and we should give thanks for the mercy which has been granted us. Today’s text takes us into the book of Judges, which is not one which often arises in conversation among Christians. However one of the points that is made about it is that God is indeed patient and merciful to his people, despite their (our) stumbling and disobedience. So when you are ready to explore something of the remarkable prophetess Deborah, begin with the prayers that follow.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

Deborah the prophetess was a strong woman at a time of military conflict. So too was Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910), an American woman during the Civil War. One John Brown was a noted abolitionist. When Howe heard Confederate soldiers singing the derisive song, John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave, she determined to make a statement for the other side in the existential dispute over the future of slavery. She went to bed, and upon waking the next morning, penned the hymn which would become known as The Battle Hymn of the Republic. The words, which went to the same tune (Battle Hymn) as the John Brown song, were a strong statement about God’s determined action in his world. She sent the words to The Atlantic Monthly and received a prize of five dollars. Publication led the hymn to become an immediate success. President Lincoln heard it and asked that it be sung again, and its popularity spread rapidly across the nation. Given the wartime provenance of the hymn, its martial character is hardly surprising, but it is that which still makes it a rousing hymn. The version below is from Together in Song¹. It omits one of the original verses which has particular allusions to the military milieu which surrounded the hymn’s creation, but includes another penned by someone else (unnamed). It makes a very appropriate prayer of praise.²

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
he is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
he has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword:
his truth is marching on.
*Glory, glory, hallelujah, glory, glory, hallelujah,
Glory, glory, hallelujah, our God is marching on.*

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
he is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment seat;
O be swift, my soul, to answer him; be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.
*Glory, glory, hallelujah, glory, glory, hallelujah,
Glory, glory, hallelujah, our God is marching on.*

¹ *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 1999), number 315.

² William J Petersen and Ardythe Petersen, *The Complete Book of Hymns. Inspiring stories about 600 hymns and praise songs* (Carol Stream, 2006), p549

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
with a glory in his bosom which transfigures you and me:
as he died to make men holy, let us live to make men free,
while God is marching on.

*Glory, glory, hallelujah, glory, glory, hallelujah,
Glory, glory, hallelujah, while God is marching on.*

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave;
he is wisdom to the mighty; he is succour to the brave;
so the world shall be his foot-stool, and the soul of time his slave:
Our God is marching on.

*Glory, glory, hallelujah, glory, glory, hallelujah,
Glory, glory, hallelujah, our God is marching on.*

Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

For we confess before you that we are often ungrateful,
and take your blessings simply for granted.

We can be quick to complain when things go wrong,
even sometimes questioning your love for us when times are tough;
yet we spend little time in prayer,
counting and giving thanks for our many blessings.

We view the world through our own distorted prism,
measuring all things against our own convenience and comfort.

Grant us hearts of gratitude, we pray,
and guard us from selfish moments of pique,
when we want to find someone to blame for our inconvenience,
our suffering or our loss;
and too readily find ourselves blaming you,
accusing you of abandoning us.

Help us to know that you are always with us,
never more so than when we are in despair.

And forgive us our unworthy attitudes,
disrespectful anger and selfish worldview.

For we repent of our sinfulness, and come to you for healing and renewal.

In the name of Jesus Christ our saviour, we pray,

Amen

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

The miracle is that God knows us even better than we know ourselves,
and yet continues to love us, even when we cannot love ourselves.

The scriptures assure us that, if we confess and repent of our sins,
God will forgive us, for the sake of Jesus who died for us.

The same Jesus rose to new life,
and in that new life is our salvation.

In the risen Christ, our sins are forgiven.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Judges 4:1-10 (Lectionary is only 1-7)

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalm 123

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

6 **Bible Reflection –**
See below

7 **Prayers for the world and Lord’s Prayer**

Wednesday was Remembrance Day. Remembrance Day was inaugurated by King George V in 1919 to commemorate those countless men and women who had lost their lives in World War I. It falls in 11 November, the day the guns fell silent on the Western Front after over four years of warfare, much of which was fought as a “war of attrition”, that is, a war to the point where one side or the other simply ran out of resources (including lives) and had to seek peace. Remembrance Day is marked in most Commonwealth nations and in some others, and now commemorates the sacrifice of women and men in all conflicts. While the day acknowledges great courage and sacrifice, it also reminds us of the futility of human warfare. This prayer is thus a prayer for peace.

Lord or God and our sovereign,

We pray today for peace in the world.

We give thanks for the many parts of our world which are at peace,
indeed an unprecedented percentage of the globe which is free of conflict.

But we cannot be silent when there is still such suffering and destruction
and devastation in too many places.

We pray for a final end to the fighting in Syria,
where the population has been benighted by proxy wars
fought among the great powers in the region.

We pray for peace in Yemen, a war given little attention here,
but just as devastating to the population of that nation.

We pray for peace in South Sudan,
the world’s newest nation and one of its bloodiest;
and for the other African states caught up in conflicts.

We pray for peace between Israel, her neighbours and the Palestinians;
in Iraq and Afghanistan, where violence persists in the wake of larger conflicts.

And we pray for the world leaders and diplomats and the international agencies,
to whom we entrust the peace of the world.

Give them wisdom, perspective, compassion, humility and flexibility,
to resolve conflicts and potential conflicts without the contest of strength
that is at the heart of all wars.

We pray for wisdom amongst all the nations,
that the vast sums – trillions of dollars – spent every year
on warfare and preparations for warfare
might instead be directed to alleviate the causes of war –
poverty, injustice, discrimination, deprivation.

We pray for the victims of war, for those whose bodies or minds bear the scars,
for the civilians caught up in the fighting, for the so-called “collateral” casualties,
for the refugees, the homeless and the bereaved.

Bring an end to conflict and warfare, we pray;
bring order and justice among the nations;
and bring into being your Kingdom, for which we all yearn.

We conclude our prayer with the prayer that Jesus taught us to say:
Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

8 **Conclusion**

These are the closing words of Psalm 30:
*You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.*
This has been God's blessing to his people through the ages,
and it is our blessing today and always.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION

It's another one of those red letter days. Today the Lectionary takes us to the book of Judges. It is hard to believe, but this is the only time in its three-year cycle that the Lectionary includes a passage from Judges! One commentary says of this particular choice,

.... it should be noted that 4:1-7 is the only text from the book of Judges to appear in the Revised Common Lectionary. Unfortunately, the lection cuts off the story just as it is getting started. Thus, it misses the building suspense, the ambiguities, and the unexpected turns of events, including the surprising ending.³

Touché! There can therefore be little surprise that many Christians know little or nothing of this important book.

The book bridges the gap between Israel's occupation of the land of promise (covered in Joshua) and the beginning of the monarchy (which is narrated in I Samuel). The "judges" after whom the book is named were leaders as much as judicial figures. Although the sequential narration implies that they were all national leaders who served one after the other, it is more likely that they were more localised, perhaps tribal, leaders. It's generally accepted that the book of Judges brings together a variety of oral traditions about these various leaders, probably passed down by the respective tribes for whom they had been local heroes. The stories were collected at some time later, and reached their final redaction perhaps around the period of the exile.⁴

The seven short verses set by the Lectionary – which I have expanded to ten – are, as the commentator quoted above observed, just the beginning of a much longer story. The story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael, and the defeat of Sisera, was clearly an important one in the Israelite tradition. Uniquely in Judges, chapter 4 is paralleled by a poetic version of the same story (with slight differences) in chapter 5, which is commonly thought to be the very earliest document of Israelite history that has found its way into the Old Testament.⁵ Yet we are robbed of this richness by the Lectionary's brevity. One has to try to read the minds of the Lectionary writers to know why they chose just this incomplete section, and what they anticipated could be gained from it without anything like the full context. I would encourage you to read Judges 4-5 if you have time, to give yourself a fair go at understanding what this story may be saying to us.

I will confine myself to several comments which *do* arise from our ten short verses.

The chapter opens with a refrain which is familiar in Judges.

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help

This conforms with a formula which is found throughout Judges: a strong leader dies, and the Israelites fall into sin once again, attracting God's punishment. As we've observed in the past, Israel's understanding of its history was that obedience brought prosperity seen as God's blessing, and disobedience brought hardship regarded as God's punishment. That historiographical understanding came most significantly to the fore at the time of the Babylonian defeat of Judah and the carrying off of much of the population into captivity in Babylon. Whether or not, as Christians, we accept that God does respond quite so directly, and in such black and white tones, to the good

³ J Clinton McCann and J. Clinton McCann Jr, *Judges: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, 2011), pp. 49f.

⁴ J Gordon Harris *et al.*, *Joshua Judges Ruth* (Grand Rapids, 2000), pp. 127ff.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 178.

and bad behaviour of his people, the situation is absolutely clear – Israel has been subjected to the rule of a foreign king. Two helpful details are added. First, Jabin’s power rests on his possession of the latest technology. This period is at the point of transition in the Mediterranean world from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Jabin possess nine hundred iron chariots, which were vastly stronger than their Bronze Age predecessors. Second, Jabin’s reign over Israel had gone on for twenty years and had been characterised by oppressive cruelty.

The situation is thus one of desperation. For best part of a generation, the Israelite tribes had been under the yoke of a cruel and technologically superior power. As they had done in the past, they finally returned to God and entrusted themselves to him. And God indeed responded, by raising up Deborah and Barak to defeat the oppressor. This is thus very much a story of God’s grace. Despite his people’s serial times of disobedience and unfaithfulness, God still reached out in mercy to them when their desperation brought them back to him.

Such mercy and forgiveness are at the heart of the gospel. Every week (at least) we come before God to confess our waywardness and sin; and every time, in Jesus Christ, we are the beneficiaries of God’s grace and mercy. We also recognise the power of desperation. I well recall a sign that stood outside a local Presbyterian church which read, “The best place to see God is from on your knees”. In other words, when we are driven to our knees in despair, we are more open to God. It was an apt reminder. When there is nowhere left to turn, we turn to God. That was the situation of the Israelites. As for them, so too for us, God responds time and time again in mercy. In Jesus’ Christ, God’s love and mercy took on human flesh. Jesus is the ultimate answer to the existential despair of all humanity.

Then, in our passage, without fanfare, we encounter Deborah, the judge and prophetess.

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.

In the patriarchal history of the Israelite there was no tradition of women’s leadership, so this reference to a woman in such a position is remarkable and noteworthy. Her situation is reminiscent of that of Moses, who also had sat all day long judging the people’s disputes prior to his appointment of officers to relieve his burden (Exodus 18:13-26). To find a woman serving, not even as a subordinate but essentially in Moses’ place, should make us sit up and take notice. Even Deborah’s name⁶ may be a pointer to her significant role.

Deborah summons Barak and informs him of God’s intended way of dealing with the Israelites’ oppressor.

[She] said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.’”

Barak’s reticence (*Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.”*) has been variously interpreted, either as an act of faith – because he recognises that any victory will be God’s and thus wants God’s representative to be with him – and as an indication of his lack of faith – because he needs someone to “hold his hand”. Deborah’s response

⁶ “The name “Deborah” appears to mean “bee,” but it contains the same consonants as the Hebrew root for “speak” and “word.” It is at least possible that Deborah’s name suggests the prophetic role of speaking God’s word.’ McCann and McCann, *op. cit.*, p.51.

would appear to indicate the latter interpretation. She also makes another statement”:

“... nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.”

The reader naturally assumes that the woman in question will be Deborah; only the remainder of the chapter, which goes beyond our reading, reveals that Sisera’s slayer is, in fact, the courageous Jael, a Kenite woman and thus not an Israelite at all. So our passage actually involves the courage of two women, while both principal male players, Barak and Sisera⁷, are portrayed as cowardly.

It is interesting that the writer to the Hebrews has a very different view of Barak.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (Hebrews 11:32-34)

Few women will be surprised at this: women have been written out of history since time immemorial. Although the etymology is completely spurious, there is nevertheless truth in the suggestion that “history” could be an elision of “his story”. “Herstory” has only really found a presence in academic writing over the past two generations or so.

The disappearance or relegation of women from the biblical tradition is very real. From the moment in the Garden of Eden, when the second creation hymn in Genesis tells us that Adam sought to blame Eve for the choice that he had, himself, made – and indeed God is portrayed as apparently accepting the excuse – (Genesis 3:12-13), most of the biblical narrative privileges men. It would take a great deal of time to rehearse fully the endless examples of this, but it is certainly worth pointing out the very important role played by the women in Jesus’ circle. Jesus’ closeness to Mary, the sister of Martha, is well known (John 12:1-9; cf Luke 7:36-50). At the time of the crucifixion, the male disciples fled, while the women, including Mary, remained close to the dying Jesus (Matthew 26:56, cf 26:31-33; 27:55-6; Mark 15:40-40)⁸. On the following Sunday morning, it was Mary who discovered the empty tomb (Mark 16:1-4; Matthew 28:1-6; Luke 23:55-24:3; John 20:1) and she to whom Jesus first appeared (Matthew 28:9; John 20:14-18). Yet these details, while certainly preserved (though less so by Luke), are given little prominence, and the leaders of the people of The Way who emerged were men (Acts 1:1, cf 1:20-26), although we’re told that “certain women” were with them in the earliest days (1:14).

By the time that the writer of I Timothy penned his letter, women were being denied any role involving authority or leadership. He wrote,

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she

⁷ Beyond our passage, the defeated Sisera hides in Jael’s tent, urging her to stand guard and lie if anyone should ask: “Is anyone here?” Not only is this in itself cowardly, but the Hebrew rendered in most translations as “anyone” actually says “a man” – “Is there a man here?” The irony is clear – Jabin is acting in an unmanly way, hiding behind a woman’s lie. In contrast, Jael acts courageously.

⁸ Luke in contrast reports, “But *all his acquaintances*, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.” (23:49 emphasis added)

will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (I Timothy 2:8-15)

Women were to be denied authority, silenced and rendered into submission; their part in the saving work of Christ was apparently to depend upon their reproductive role (presumably because only they could give birth to more men!). And the teaching rests on that same untruth that poor old Adam had been lured into sin by his gullible and persuasive partner!

We are a long road from the judge and prophetess Deborah, to whom the Israelites – men and women – came for judgement, who summoned Barak and instructed him according to God's will, and whom Barak insisted on accompanying him before he had the nerve to engage the mighty Sisera. I know too many individuals, and whole denominations, who defend a subordinate role for women because of their too-literal interpretation of particular passages from scripture. Our passage from Judges should thus serve the very important role of reminding us of the importance of women in the history of God's people, and alerting us to the fact that this is not often immediately obvious when we read the scriptures. The modern embrace of gender-neutral language is very important, but equally important is that we recognise the invisibility of women in much of the biblical narrative, and make a deliberate effort to seek them out by asking new questions of the texts.

None of this goes back to the teaching of Jesus. In Matthew's gospel, in answer to a clever conundrum with which the Sadducees presented him,

Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. (Matthew 22:29-30)

Marriage and gender go hand in hand. If there is no marriage, Jesus is surely implying that there will be no gender, in the resurrection life. However Paul is far more specific in his letter to the Galatians, and he is speaking about the here and now life of faith, not about resurrection life:

... in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26-8)

The saving work of the gospel, and the love and mercy of God, are not for particular groups, races or genders. Our passage from Judges, and our encounter with Deborah, proclaim clearly and forthrightly the equal place of all women in the Kingdom of God.

As so often, an Old Testament passage leads us to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The patient grace and forgiveness which God showed to his people in the time of the Judges are the same grace and forgive which Jesus personified, and made available to all who believed. And the breaking down of barriers of all kinds, including gender, within God's people is exemplified by the signal example of the courageous Deborah, leader and prophetess of Israel.