

Trinity 11 Mattins 2019 (Judges 4)



JAEI, DEBORAH AND BARAK

*Salomon de Bray (1597-1664)*

Judges is probably the most testosterone-packed book in the Bible describing the exploits of men behaving badly. But, it is also the book where we find the stories of 22 women and Judges Chapter 4, which we heard earlier, relates the story of 2 of those formidable women, Deborah and Jael. It is a complicated story so I want to start by revisiting the text.

For 20 years the people of Israel were led by Deborah. And when Deborah came on the scene (c.1200BC) the Israelites were being oppressed by the Canaanites. This was not a little local difficulty; village life had almost ceased to exist because of the systematic violence inflicted by the Canaanites over a long period. So when we look at Salomon de Bray's picture in your Order of Service we see Deborah depicted, in the middle, as an old woman whose face is crinkled, careworn and lined by the responsibilities of office and the pressures of conflict.

And today's reading tells us how this long conflict came to a climax. Deborah, in response to a word from the Lord, summoned an Israelite warrior called Barak, the fresh-faced,

armoured man, on the right of the picture. She tells him to assemble 10,000 men to fight the Canaanites who were led by a notorious general called Sisera. The idea was to use Barak's men as bait to draw out the Canaanites. Barak was not keen on this idea because Sisera had a vast fleet of 900 iron chariots. By contrast the Israelites hadn't even entered the iron age – we're told they had neither sword nor spear. So Barak procrastinated until he reluctantly agreed *provided* Deborah came with him. Her response was: "I will go with you but you will not receive the honour for this victory; Sisera will be given into the hands of a woman". Looking at de Bray's picture it is easy to imagine this uncompromising woman saying these words with a certain disdain. The name Deborah means bee and she certainly looks as if she has a sting in her tail.

Well, Barak on the right of the picture is told to assemble his Israelite army at the Wadi Kishon; and we need to remember that a wadi is a river which is dry for most of the year and only flows when the rains briefly appear. So Barak assembled at the wadi and Sisera took the bait and mobilised his chariots. But just

as the battle was about to begin lightning flashed across the sky and a tumultuous storm was unleashed. In an instant the wadi became a raging torrent. The chariots of Sisera were engulfed in a flash flood, his forces panicked and fled. It's like an action-replay of the Exodus, a connection I'm sure we are meant to make.

But, there is an important postscript. After this military disaster Sisera escaped on foot and headed for a nearby town where one of his chariot suppliers lived. When Sisera found his house, actually a tent, the supplier was away from home and only his wife Jael was there – and she is the woman portrayed on the left of our picture. Sisera we're told entered her tent and lay down. The text hints that, at the very least, Sisera abused the strict rules of hospitality by going into Jael's tent and falling asleep. The abuse may have gone further and de Bray's picture certainly has sexual overtones to it. Perhaps that's why Jael decided to take action. She took in her hand a hammer and a tent peg and, as Sisera lay asleep, drove the peg through the temple of Sisera's head. And as we look at de Bray's picture we

can see not only the hammer and the iron peg in the hands of Jael but also the steely look in her eye. So was fulfilled the prophecy of Deborah that Sisera would be given into the hands of a woman. As a result of these two women's work we are told "the land had rest for forty years".

Well, it's a graphic account and it is one of the reasons the book of Judges is so often written off as a deeply troublesome, un-Christian text. But, it is an account of strife between rival groups in the Middle East; it is an account of abuse; and it tells of uncertainty about the roles of men and women – all topical issues. But, what does this troublesome text have to say to us?

Jael's horrific act of violence is something, in that part of the globe, we associate more with terrorist groups than with the deliverance of God. But, one scholar has written of the way the OT portrays God delivering his people by inflicting wounds. Some of those are what we might call examples of positive wounding as when Abraham is commanded to initiate the rite of circumcision. But, there are also examples of destructive wounding as in the Exodus and in this story of Deborah and

Jael. But, in the NT there is a change – the wounding is done not *by* God but *to* God in Jesus. Jesus allowed *himself* to be wounded and put to death in order that we might be delivered. It's something hinted at in our second reading: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases". And we are delivered not for privilege but for service so that we might shine as a light in a dark world. But, if we are to shine with the light of Christ we need at some point to consider the Deborah story as a metaphor for the violence within ourselves and the way we contribute unconsciously to the suffering of the world of which we are a part.

The Fathers of the church in the early centuries of Christianity diagnosed that the human heart contains many selves and many voices within it. One sign of this is that so often we find ourselves reacting in ways that stem from past experiences. To give a trivial example: for years I was scared of dogs because of a childhood experience when an Alsatian leapt up at me barking aggressively – whenever I encountered a dog the child within me took over. It's as if selves we once were linger

on within us and have power to make us feel threatened or angry or humiliated. In a different way when we sleep a whole cast of characters emerge from hidden places within the psyche and enact dramas in our mind. If some of these selves within us seem unpalatable we need to recall that Jesus mixed with the outcast and disreputable in his society. In today's NT reading we find him engaging with those considered offensive by touching a leper and responding to a Roman Centurion, an enemy of the Jewish people. So one response to the disreputable and unacceptable parts of our psyche is to bring them to Jesus and ask him to heal the dysfunctional selves that form the community within us. And we are called to do this not simply for our own well-being. Without that personal integration we won't be free to bring genuine reconciliation and unity to the violent and dysfunctional world that we see mirrored to us in the book of Judges and daily on the news. And that is why we read these troubling texts of the OT; they are given to us to make us reflect on our own hearts and minds and turn to the Lord that we might find healing for ourselves and the world.

