

So far in our sermon series we've looked at two characters from the Old Testament
Both towering figures in the Bible story

Abraham: described in the NT as the father of the faithful
And Moses: who lead the Israelite exodus out of slavery in Egypt –
and so kick-started Israel as a nation.

But neither Abraham nor Moses have a book of the Bible named after them
The first person who does is Joshua
And it's Joshua who we are going to be thinking about this morning.

I have known, and loved, the story of Joshua since childhood
And what a wonderful role model he was for a young person – especially for a boy!

Joshua, the intrepid spy –
Selected along with Caleb and 10 others to go ahead and spy out the Promised Land
And when the spies returned, courageously disagreeing with the majority report.
The majority were daunted by what they had seen
And told Moses there was no way the Israelites could take the land

But Joshua and Caleb trusted God
They were confident that God would give them success.

What a powerful message for a young person setting out in life!
Trust God and obey God and he will enable you to do great things for Him

I'm not saying that I've always obeyed God, or always trusted Him,
Far from it
But that message has never left me

Joshua and Caleb's trust in God marked them out from all their contemporaries
It's the reason why God allowed only them, from all their generation, to eventually
enter the Promised Land

And it's the reason why, just before Moses dies, that Joshua is chosen to lead the
Israelites into the Promised Land –

But before they're ready to cross over the River Jordan into the Land, God meets
with Joshua
And he gives Joshua a command that becomes the motto of his life.

"Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed,
For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Seven times Joshua receives this command from God

And it becomes his guiding principle as he leads the people across the Jordan
and puts them in possession of the land which God promised to their ancestors.

What a great message for a young person growing up to adulthood
“Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed,
For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

In my early 20s the story of Joshua was important for me in a different way.

While at university I came across books by Alan Redpath
He was a Bible teacher, evangelist and pastor
One of his many books was *Victorious Christian living: studies in the book of Joshua*.

In that book he uses the story of Joshua as a sort of parable of the Christian life
He suggests that many Christians are rather like the children of Israel in the
wilderness

They have come to faith but haven't moved on
They haven't entered into the fullness of what God has in store for them
They haven't yet entered, as it were, the Promised Land.

Alan Redpath writes that Joshua shows us how to move on –
how to enter that fullness –
Through trust in God and obedience to his leading.

Much more recently I've been forced to think again about Joshua because of the
writings of Richard Dawkins –
leader and spokesman for the New Atheists.

In his book, *The God Delusion*, Dawkins pours scorn on the book of Joshua and what
it seems to tell us about the nature of God

While it's often claimed that the Christian faith is the foundation for morality Dawkins
argues that the book of Joshua shows the God of the Bible to be an immoral,
murderous, ethnic cleanser.

He's referring of course, to what we read in Joshua of commands given by God, and
obeyed by Joshua
Commands to drive the indigenous peoples out of the Promised Land
And not just to drive them out but to destroy their cities and slaughter the inhabitants.

So we read that after the collapse of the walls of Jericho they
“utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and
ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.

That was the pattern of destruction that was repeated in the taking of other
Canaanite cities.

And in each case the killing is described as commanded by God.

Richard Dawkins critique can't be brushed aside.
It forces us to look at Joshua with different eyes.
To look beyond Joshua's faith and obedience to what it was that he faithfully did in
obedience to God.

Dawkins forces us to grapple with the question of how the God described in Joshua can be just and good.

Many attempts have been made to answer this question.

Many have pointed out the depravity and horror of Canaanite religion Which even by ancient standards was grossly immoral. Its debauchery was all to do with its fertility religion that linked eroticism of all sorts to the successful outcome of planting and harvest.

Worst of all, Canaanites practiced child sacrifice to the god Molech. Molech was depicted as a bull's head with human body – in whose belly a fire was stoked and in whose outstretched arms a child was placed that would be burned to death....

Infants and children as old as four were sacrificed. And there's evidence that the children thus burned to death sometimes numbered in the thousands.

The violence in Joshua may therefore be about judgement as much it's about conquest -
Judgement that we might all cry out for.

Others suggest that the language used in Joshua should be understood in the context of other ancient Near Eastern military accounts. These commonly used hyperbole—exaggeration for the sake of emphasis—especially when it came to military conquest.

So, phrases like “utterly destroy”, or “put to death men and women, children, and infants”—as well as other “obliteration language”—were stock phrases used even when women or children weren't present. It was language used to describe a great victory, not complete annihilation.

We still use language that way when we talk of our favorite sports team “wiping out” or “annihilating” the opposition.

So the language of Joshua may be hyperbole - exaggeration for emphasis.

Others again point out the evidence, from within the book of Joshua, that there was in fact no wholesale slaughter.

At the end of Hoshua there's a long list of the cities and regions that the Israelites did **not** conquer.

I came across some research that shows that if you look carefully at these lists, and have a map alongside you, a clear pattern emerges: That in a country of hills and river valleys it was the hill country that was occupied by the Israelites while the Canaanites continued to occupy the valleys

So, in the final chapter the main danger that Joshua warns the people of is that in living side by side with the Canaanites they would start to follow their gods, their evil ways, and abandon the God of Abraham.

That is the context of our second reading
It's exactly because they were living in close proximity to Canaanite religion that Joshua tells them they must make a choice.

"If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living".

So we've looked at three ways of understanding the violence in Joshua:

1. That the depravity and barbarity of Canaanite religion, particularly against children, cried out for judgment
 2. That the battle language of Joshua may follow the common practice of the time in using exaggeration for emphasis
 3. That the Israelites did not in fact drive the Canaanites out of the land but ended up living in close proximity to them.
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I don't think these points make the question of violence in Joshua go away
But, for myself, they mean that it doesn't dominate my thinking

They allow me, again, to hear a spiritual message for us and for our times.

The message that I hear is this:

We, like the Israelites in the Promised Land, live cheek by jowl with a culture that is indifferent to, and even hostile to, the ways of God
A culture that in fact worships other gods
The gods of money, fame, sex, individual freedom -
And, maybe above all, the god of personal peace and affluence.

And we face the same question that Joshua put to the people when he gathered them together at Shechem.

"choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve"

May Joshua be a role model for all of us when he declares before all the people.

"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Amen

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