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June 21st: Judges 4 & Galatians 6

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Alastair Roberts

Deborah and Barak. Bearing one another's burdens, fulfilling the law of Christ.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Judges, chapter 4. Judges, chapter 4. Barak said to her, Naheba the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, the father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent as far away as the Okenzeh Ananim, which is near Kedesh. When Sisera was told that Barak, the son of Abinuum, had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harasheth Hagoyim to the river Kishon. And Deborah said to Barak, Up! For this is the day in which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand.

Does not the Lord go out before you? So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. And the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot.

And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harasheth Hagoyim, and all the army of

Sisera fell by the edge of the sword. Not a man was left. But Sisera fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite.

For there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me, do not be afraid. So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug.

And he said to her, Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty. So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. And he said to her, Stand at the opening of the tent, and if any man comes and asks you, Is anyone here? Say no.

But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died.

And behold, as Barak was pursuing Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said to him, Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking. So he went into her tent, and there lay Sisera dead, with the tent peg in his temple. So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel, and the hand of the people of Israel pressed harder and harder against Jabin the king of Canaan until they destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.

Judges chapter 4 begins with the usual depressing refrain that runs throughout this book, And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Ehud has died, and the peace that he bought for Israel has passed too. Once again the Lord sells them into the hand of a cruel enemy.

One would think after a few iterations of this that Israel would be thankful to serve the Lord, but this doesn't seem to be the case. This time Israel is oppressed by Jabin king of Canaan who reigned in Hazor. Hazor was a powerful city in the north of Israel near Galilee, and this king is a reminder of the ground that Israel has lost.

They had already fought a king Jabin who ruled in Hazor back in Joshua chapter 11. There they defeated him. Now they are losing to old foes again, and this is a very bad sign.

Jabin's military commander is called Sisera who has a war machine of 900 iron chariots, the latest military hardware as Barry Webb puts it. Back in chapter 1 Judah hadn't been able to control the plains as the inhabitants of the lowlands had chariots. And of course Pharaoh had pursued Israel with chariots when they left Egypt in the Exodus.

Chariots are clearly a problem for Israel. And in this context we're introduced to the character of Deborah. Deborah is a judge but not like the judges that we have encountered to this point.

She is someone who settles disputes and adjudicates in difficult cases, but she is not herself a deliverer. In this story the role of deliverer is principally played by Barak. Deborah's calling as a judge is closely related to the fact that she is a prophetess, someone who could deliver the word of the Lord to Barak and to others.

While most of the judges were primarily military men going out before Israel leading them against their enemies, the dynamic with Deborah was different and perhaps more akin to figures like Samuel or Moses, other prophetic judges. Deborah sat under her palm tree and delivered judgment upon the cases brought to her by the children of Israel. We might be surprised at seeing a woman judging Israel, and indeed it is surprising.

There was no other woman as a judge in Israel's recorded history, and no reigning queen among the 42 monarchs in the subsequent history of Israel or Judah, save for Athaliah the murderous usurper, who is not included among the official number. The surprise that the Lord is going to deliver Israel, with two women being the great heroines of the hour, is part of the significance of this text. Deborah and Jael are surprising instruments in the hand of the Lord, much as Shamgar's ox goad or Samson's donkey's jawbone.

Much of Judges is about the Lord's proof that his deliverance of his people doesn't depend upon those things and persons that we would usually rely upon or look to. The stories of Scripture so often depend upon the most surprising characters. The story of the kingdom begins with a woman praying in the temple, a woman whom no one notices, even the high priest thinks that she's just drunk.

Yet it's through Hannah's prayer that the story of the kingdom begins. The crushing or the suppression of the virility of a nation was always one of the most important concerns for an impressing power. Remove the weapons, kill or enslave the males, and emasculate and subjugate their leaders.

That was the way in which one nation could be brought under the domination of another. Scripture presents us with a number of such moments in history, the Exodus being one example. Pharaoh enslaves Israel, kills their boys.

And in this situation, deliverance arose from women. As women delivered the infant Moses and protected the Israelite boys from Pharaoh, women protected the seed that would crush the serpent's head. And Deborah is associated with the other women who lived at such times, with Jochebed, Miriam, the Hebrew midwives, with Hannah, with Esther, with Elizabeth and Mary, all these characters who in times of great desperation rose up to save their people.

Throughout the Book of Judges there is a lot of wordplay. Anyone interested in this aspect of the text, I highly recommend that you read James Bajon's notes that work through the Book of Judges and give a special attention to this feature of it. Deborah's name means bee, and she will sting the Canaanites, much as Ehud brought a sting to

Eglon in the preceding chapter.

The Canaanites might dismiss women like Deborah in jail, yet they have a deadly sting. Deborah seems to be based in the region of Benjamin and Ephraim in the middle of the land. The battle is fought towards the north of the land in the territory of Naphtali, Zebulun and Issachar.

They assemble not too far from the bottom of the Sea of Galilee. A number of the tribes participated in the battle, but the tribes in Gilead seem not to have been involved, and there is no mention of Judah. It's a battle of the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, Zebulun and Naphtali.

Deborah summons Barak to her and gives him the word of the Lord. He is to gather his men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 men from Naphtali and Zebulun. The Lord will draw out Sisera to the river Kishon, where he will be given into Barak's hands.

Barak was instructed to go to battle, but he suffered a minor judgement when he requested that Deborah accompany him, partly because she was unlike the typical male judge, and partly also because she was one who was a prophetess primarily, not primarily a deliverer. Deborah was expected to be absent from battle. We see the same sort of thing in the case of Samuel.

He's not a deliverer in the way that someone like Barak or Saul or some of these other figures were, and so he's not expected to be at the battle in the same way. Deborah is neither a warrior nor a military commander, and the judgement upon Barak for calling Deborah to accompany him was that the opposing general would be delivered into the hands of a woman, who would do Barak's job for him. He presumably thinks this is going to be Deborah, but it turns out to be someone different.

Had Barak courageously followed the word of the Lord and not called for Deborah to accompany him, she would not have gone into the battle, and Sisera would have been delivered into Barak's own hands, galvanising Barak's authority in Israel. Akin to a figure like Joan of Arc, Deborah is a prophetic woman who leads a movement to restore the rule of her nation at a moment of crisis and the utter breakdown of its power. She's not an ordinary leader in time of peace.

Barak is like the Dauphin, who must be helped to achieve his victory, after which the security and power of the nation can be restored under his rule. Sisera goes out to the river Kishon, where Barak and his men go down to attack him with Deborah, and Sisera was given into his hands. But before we hear about this, we are introduced to the character of Heber the Kenite, a descendant of Jethro or Hobab, the Midianite, and Moses' father-in-law.

The reminder of Moses at this point is probably not insignificant. The chapter doesn't

explain how the victory came about. We have to wait to discover that until the next chapter, where we get some hint in verses 20-21.

From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon, march on, my soul, with might. The strength of Sisera's chariots became a liability with the flooding of the Kishon.

Deborah could be compared to Moses in this battle. She presides over the new birth of a nation when all had seemed lost. Like Moses, she is the divinely instructed prophet who directs the battle from behind the scenes, leading to a miraculous victory over a powerful army of chariots through a sudden torrent of water.

The chariots of Pharaoh were swept away by the waters of the Red Sea, and the chariots of Jabin and Sisera were swept away by the river Kishon. Like Moses, she sings a song of victory afterwards. The parallels are very important, and they give some indication of the significance of Deborah's work.

Sisera flees to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, where he thinks he will find shelter. However, he has a surprise coming. There are themes of motherhood throughout this story, which continue into the next chapter, where they are even more prominent, Deborah styling herself a mother in Israel.

Jael treats Sisera like an infant. She soothes him, lays him down, covers him with a rug, gives him milk to drink, protects him, and puts him to sleep. And then she drives a tent peg through his temple.

Once again, the victory is won for Israel by a strange instrument and an unexpected person. This is a story where the glory is won by the women. In both cases, there is a sort of deception involved.

In the case of Deborah, it's in the drawing out of Sisera's army into a position of danger, a trap that he's not aware of. In the case of Jael, it's in deceiving Sisera with the false appearance of hospitality. She acts as a tender mother, yet like Deborah, she is a deadly hornet sent before the people of God.

Jael's slaying of Sisera was associated with Barak's failure to assume his proper role. Crushing the head of the serpent Sisera was the task of the seed, which Barak was supposed to be. He was supposed to be the deliverer of his people.

However, since the seed was not yet powerful enough to crush the serpent's head himself, the woman had to do it for him, the mother. This was a sign that the woman's task in raising the seed was not yet completed. Yet Jael deceiving the serpent Sisera and crushing his head is a poetic reversal of the great deception, the serpent's deception of Eve.

It's a minor fulfilment of the promise of Genesis 3.15, the crushing of the serpent's head by the seed of the woman. Jael's slaying of Sisera occurs not as she goes out into the battle, but as she invites him into her tent, deceives him with the apparent extension of hospitality, then pierces his head with the domestic tool of a tent peg. Jael, not being a fighter, employs the tactic of cunning deception, which is characteristic of women in their struggle against the serpents in history.

Sarai against Pharaoh, Rebekah against Pharaoh and Abimelech, Rachel against Laban, Tamar against Judah, the Hebrew midwives against Pharaoh, Rahab against the king of Jericho, Michael against Saul, Esther against Haman, etc. The Song of Deborah does not class Jael with the warriors, but with women in tents. The point of all of this is not to suggest that women cannot be heroes, that heroism is restricted to the front line of battle.

Rather, the point is to show the heroism of the mothers of Israel, the way in which they will fight against the serpent and win the victory. Here this occurs through deadly means, but elsewhere in Scripture it repeatedly occurs through the means of prayer, through the means of wisdom and cunning. The front line warriors in the Lord's battles are not the people that we expect.

A question to consider, how does Deborah's character as a prophetess make her stand out from many of the other judges? Galatians chapter 6 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour, for each will have to bear his own load. Let the one who has taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.

Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. For whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

In Galatians chapter 6, Paul brings the argument of his epistle to a conclusion. He has just listed the fruit of the spirit in verses 22-23 of the preceding chapter. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

As John Berkeley observes, these fruit are given concrete form in the communal maxims that follow. Verses 1-10 discuss the shape that the life of the Christian community must take, and it is one marked by the fruit of the spirit throughout. As Berkeley remarks, the fruit that springs from the spirit's life is here identified in the delicate negotiation of communal relations, in behavioural qualities fostered over time.

The love that stands at their head is inherently social. If faith is operative in love, it could never be reduced to an individual relationship to Christ. The chapter begins with counsel for how to restore a sinning brother.

It is addressed to those who are spiritual, to people who are living in the life of the spirit. Grace, gentleness and humility are the means by which this must be done. We do not wield people's sins against them as means of building ourselves up, but gently and carefully reach out to them as fellow sinners.

Having recognised and sought to remove the logs in our own eyes, we won't be inclined to vaunt ourselves over others, or to believe that we are above or immune to the pull of sin. So often we see the sins of others as fuel for our self-righteous superiority. However, if we are spiritual, our desire will be the building up of the body of Christ, and the deliverance and restoration of the sinner.

The flesh pits us against each other, each person living for his own sake and for his own advancement. The condemnation of the law is a weapon that we can wield against each other, seeking to imprison our enemies in guilt and condemnation, so that we might gain social and moral advantage over them. As Paul described it in the preceding chapter, this is biting and devouring each other, and those who practice this form of life will ultimately get consumed themselves.

In a society of individuals competing against each other for honour, sin is an opportunity for competitive advantage, something to be seized upon, often in subtle ways. This perverse desire in us can even infect the way that harmful yet delicious gossip about others is shared under the guise of prayer points. Bringing public dishonour upon others

can burnish our reputation by comparison.

Yet a spiritual community responds to such moments with grace and gentleness. They are especially vigilant at such times not to be trapped in the sin of pride, to which we can so easily fall prey at such moments. Recognition of our own vulnerability to sin brings humility, which puts us in a better position to restore others.

The alternative to the competitive pursuit of honour is the willing adoption of the work of slaves. We bear one another's burdens. This is the work of service, but not now of a class of slaves to their masters, but of each person to his neighbour.

We are all to be slaves of each other in love, a reciprocal form of relationship where no person is ultimately placed over others. We all stand on the same level ground of grace, and everyone willingly places others before themselves. In placing others before ourselves we are simply following the law of Christ himself, for this is the way that our Master took with us.

He is our Master, yet he ministered to us in love. In this way our lives are lived according to the rule of Christ, but this is also the way in which the moral purpose of the Torah is achieved. Adopting the way of service is informed by an honest self-appraisal, where we recognise that, when it comes to the game of honour, we are all ultimately bankrupts.

The game of honour is built around the projection of a false and inflated image of our righteousness in a competitive realm of mutual display, and we reject this way of boasting. Yet we adopt a new boast. We boast in the cross of Christ, by which we have died to this old world of competitive honour, with its biting and devouring of each other.

We now boast in Christ, a boast proclaimed on the basis of our own bankruptcy. Whether circumcision or uncircumcision, we have no status with God that is not ultimately founded upon completely unmerited grace in Christ. When we minister to others, we must always primarily test our own work.

Paul knows that we can so easily take up a moral interest in others in order to deflect from our own moral responsibilities. Ultimately, we will all bear our own loads, as we have to give account of ourselves, not our neighbour, before God on the last day. We should not be so preoccupied with helping out all of our neighbours with the moats in their eyes that we have not dealt with the logs in our own.

Under the teaching of bearing one another's burdens, Paul gives the example of teachers and learners. This is a classic asymmetric relationship, a hierarchical relationship that many would think of. However, Paul wants us to see how it too can be subject to this principle that breaks down the hierarchy.

The teacher is not to place themselves over the learner, and the learner is to consider themselves and to act as a minister to those teaching them, as they minister to those

ministering to them in prayer, encouragement, financial support, hospitality, and all these other things, all stand together under the authority of Christ, in the mutual dependence of his body. We so easily see other people's gifts as threats to our own honour, but in the spirit we each employ our gifts for the service of our neighbours, and so overcome the competitive struggle of honour that many labour under. Paul solemnly warns the Galatians against carelessness in their lives.

We either sow to the flesh or we sow to the spirit, and there will be harvests. God is not mocked. Those who act according to the flesh will ultimately face the consequences and rewards of their way of life.

Those, for instance, who have given themselves to biting and devouring others will find that they too are consumed. However, those who sow to the spirit will end up reaping eternal life. The process of sowing to the spirit is one that takes self-control, takes patience and perseverance, yet sowing to the flesh comes quite naturally.

Life has its seasons of sowing, seasons where we are making decisions and developing habits, and developing contacts and relationships that will have their consequences many years down the line. Then we have seasons of reaping, when we receive the consequences of the ways of life to which we have given ourselves. These can be periods of crisis, times when we realise the mistakes that we have made.

Such times tend to hit at particular seasons of people's lives. We talk about the midlife crisis, for instance. Recognising these times of harvest, we need to be careful what we are sowing.

For Paul, it is clear that eternal life will not be received apart from living in the spirit. We do not receive our standing with God on the basis of anything we are or anything we have done, yet our union with Christ, who alone is the basis of our standing with God, is lived out in the life of the spirit, and those who do not produce the spirit's fruit demonstrate that they have no part in him. It can be so easy to grow weary in doing good.

We see the wicked prosper, we see the wicked being honoured, while we can suffer and be shamed. Yet if we faithfully persevere, we can be assured of a reward, and the wicked for their part will finally receive the harvest of their actions too. The Judaizers are concerned to make a good showing in the realm of competitive mutual display of the flesh.

They are very concerned to look good to the unbelieving Jews by downplaying the scandal of the cross, defining themselves primarily by Torah observance. Indeed, circumcising the Galatian Christians and bringing them over to the way of Torah observance as proselytes is a means by which they can look better to their unbelieving Jewish neighbours. See, we've made some converts! As Christians, it can be so easy to

be trapped in the realm of the flesh ourselves, concerned to appear good to unbelievers, for whom we will use our fellow Christians as means to advance ourselves.

Perhaps we will broadcast and emphasise their sins to make us look good by comparison, or perhaps we will disown them, as the Judaizers might have disowned Paul, in order to appear to be on the right side. Perhaps we will, like the Judaizers, fearfully go down the way of pursuing conformity with the cultural norms in order to downplay the scandal of the faith. Yet because of the cross of Christ, Paul has been crucified to this old world, this old world of mutual display, competitive honour, and seeking the approval of men.

Christ's crucifixion was the ultimate in a dishonourable death, a body stripped and beaten, spat upon and marked, hung, impotent and exposed on a wooden cross as a public shame. This is the absolute negation of the world of the flesh. Yet this is the badge of honour, it's the defining event for the Christian.

When Paul says that he bears in his body the marks of Jesus, he might be referring to the deep welts in his back from whips, the crooked gait of a man whose body has been battered by many cruelties, the signs of a person that the world has spat out, much as it spat out his master at Calvary. For such a person, what remains? Not the old structures of honour in the world of the flesh, things like circumcision and the competitive pursuit of social status, and advantage and advancement over others, but a new creation. Paul pronounces a blessing upon everyone who has adopted this pattern of Christ, the way of life that is founded upon and defined by him, not by the works of the law, not by the status of the Torah, not by the honour that is given by men, but by the grace of God, an event that overcomes and nullifies all of these status and honour games that we play.

In giving this blessing, he particularly mentions the Jews who have adopted this way of life, who have grounded their lives not in the honour given by Torah, in circumcision, or in the status that they have as an exclusive nation, but in the grace of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. They are the Israel of God. A question to consider, how does the Spirit reorient our attitude to doing good to others? How does this way of life differ from that lived in the flesh?