

**Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2021**  
**Joshua 5:13 – 6:20**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's Word.

Come Holy Spirit, change our hearts and minds to be more like Jesus. Come Holy Spirit, soften our hearts to the Word of God. Come among us Holy Spirit, with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

Up to this point in Joshua things have been quite easy for us, the readers. We've heard God's call through the early chapters... to commit ourselves to His purposes, daunting though that is, but nonetheless God calls us to it because He promises to be with us. And so, as a united people we can press forward, we can dream again, for we know and remember that God can do the incredible, that He is calling us to greater things, and He showed His power and grace when He gave His life for us in Jesus upon the Cross.

But with the story of Jericho and its defeat, we enter upon uncomfortable reading, for none of the city are spared, except Rahab... and her household. These kind of passages raise hard, disquieting questions, and reconciling what we read here with what we know of God through Jesus is a challenge to say the very least.

As such, Christians have tended to spiritualise these parts of the Scriptures, maybe seeing in the fall of Jericho a metaphor for other things in life. Or, we've simply ignored or rejected anything we find offensive, including the difficult portions here. To be honest, we'd probably rather tear out the pages. So, what are we to do with this kind of material? Does it have any relevance for us today? In answer to these questions, I have three words to structure our thinking this morning: context, character and cross.

Firstly, 'context'. As with every passage of Scripture it's always important to remember the context and there are various parts to this context. We need to note, for example, that we read Joshua through modern lenses tinted by our culture's abhorrence of war and violence and — in the case of Christians — by Jesus' ethical teachings. The world of Joshua's day jars with us because it is so distant from our time and sounds so harsh to our ears. The reality is that the ancient and modern worlds are truly different, with a huge chasm of three thousand years and vast cultural differences between their time and ours. As one commentator said: '...in a sense, readers' discomfort with Joshua is a good sign: it shows the depth with which the gospel has transformed them.'

And not just transformed Christians, but... transformed wider society as well. Sure, we still have our issues with wider society today, but it was the Christian Scriptures that fuelled faith and dreams to treat women and children better, and to end the slave trade, and to influence the shaping of laws where love for neighbour and even your enemy was unknown before Jesus spoke those words.

Under 'context', we also need to remember the wider story in the Scriptures, because there is a context which leads to this point in history. In Genesis, we read these words: '...the Lord said to [Abram]...In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.' (Genesis 15:16)

For four hundred years, God had patiently observed the peoples of Canaan, the Amorites, and had seen their moral decline. A decline which led to child sacrifice as part of their worship of false gods. The name Jericho means 'moon city' and likely it was dedicated to worshipping the moon god. This is part of the context.

So, let's move onto 'character' and in particular the character of God. Can God be truly loving when it is His actions that led to the fall of Jericho? Is there a disparity between the God of the Old and New Testaments? Has God got a split personality?

Well, let us first note that the New Testament shows no unease about Joshua's actions and Jesus never disowns the Old Testament or how it portrayed God. In fact, Hebrews chapter 11, where we read of great heroes of the faith, includes the story of Jericho... and affirms God's people, as well as Rahab, as individuals who acted in faith. The early church was able to look back on this story differently than what we do. Why is that?

As part of the New Testament reading plan, it's been really helpful working through the book of Acts again, and along the way certain words and ideas have been jumping out for me. Of relevance for us today, is part of a speech which Peter makes to people who want to know more about his faith, and so Peter says this about Jesus: 'We are witnesses of everything [Jesus] did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen...He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.' (Acts 10:39-42)

If someone asked you about your faith, what would you say? We might speak of Jesus, we might speak of the Cross, but would we dare to mention that Jesus is judge of the living...

and the dead? I'm not sure, because it makes us and others uncomfortable. Now, there could be any number of reasons for this. For example, the early church faced great persecution and Christians were executed for their faith, so I wonder if it is easier – maybe even helpful – to speak of Jesus as judge when we face great evil.

Nevertheless, the idea of God, of Jesus, being judge is a truth affirmed throughout the Scriptures and even in the teaching of Jesus. In fact, it could be argued that when... Jesus speaks of judgment He's even tougher than a lot of the Old Testament. And let's also remember that God is described in the Old Testament as the One who is truly righteous, a merciful ruler of all peoples, a defender of the weak in all nations, and that ultimately it will be the coming of His kingdom which brings an end to war and true peace for all.

What is more, God is on record as stating His preference for life and blessing, for He says through the prophet Ezekiel: “As surely as I live...I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!” (Ezekiel 18:23)

Across the Scriptures, we see that God reveals Himself as loving, life-giving, merciful and gracious. But He is also holy, righteous and so the judge of all. Paul writing to the Corinthians, says that love ‘...does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.’ (1 Cor. 13:6) It is not incompatible to having a loving God who also judges evil, judges all sin, and that is what happens with Jericho.

As we read earlier, God waited, He knew the Amorites were on a trajectory of moral decline and eventually He would judge them for that, using the nation of ancient Israel as the agents of His judgment. That may be why the angel, who met with Joshua, said he was neither for Israel or its enemies; God was not taking sides there, and Joshua needed to remember that he was part of something bigger.

However, this role for Joshua and the people was a specific and time-limited calling, and the Old Testament rarely recalls the violent... conquest of Canaan, it never glories in its harshness, and never promotes it as policy for the future.

But let there be no mistaking: God is judge, yet He is a judge who is kind and patient, offering grace after grace. Indeed, He shows that even to Jericho, because He didn’t have to instruct Israel to walk around the city for 6 days – God could have judged it in other ways. But that procession around the city was a final, repeated last chance – a bid, a call to surrender to God and turn from their ways,... grace still remained a possibility, as seen in the treatment of Rahab.

The balance of God as judge and as loving Creator, is brought into sharp focus with our third word: ‘Cross’. The story of the fall of Jericho reminds us that God does not overlook sin forever, and that one day we must all give an account to God. This is an uncomfortable claim, and we may try to push back, seeking to justify our actions, that we’re not on a par with the Amorites, that they deserved judgment, but not us, not me. In the New Testament, we find the church teaching otherwise, for Paul will say to the those in Rome: ‘...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23). We all have sinned, we all have gone astray, following our way rather than God’s, we do not live up to His standard, His glory. It does not matter if our lives are outwardly better than the Amorites, we all have sinned – and so when we stand before our judge, we come before Him as imperfect, and only that which is holy, on a standard with the glory of God, will share in His future kingdom.

Friends, would you claim holiness? Is your holiness on a standard with God’s glory? When I came to faith, I was at my moral lowest, brought face to face with my sin. Now, in the nineteen years of following Jesus, I’ve grown, I’ve matured, my character is better than it was. Yet, even this past week I could name multiple times when my anger led me to sin, when hurt or apathy has led me to minimise others or treat them poorly, even in

righteous anger for an injustice someone else faced I entertained thoughts that were less than loving and not reflective of God's glory.

Friends, we all have a sin problem and nothing we do can cover over that or wipe the slate clean. Indeed, just before Paul said that all have sinned, he also wrote this: '... no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.' (Rom. 3:20)

Paul is saying that nothing we do, not our religious activity, nor our morally good actions, make us right (or righteous) before God. God's law simply helps us see how far short we fall of the glory of God.

So, is that the end of the story? Is God simply circling around the world, waiting for the time to bring judgment upon us all? Well, no – hallelujah! Because Paul goes on to say: '...righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith.' (Rom. 3:22-25)

By faith, Rahab turned to the living God and was spared. By faith, we too can be made right with God if we turn to Jesus. Because on the Cross He died as a sacrifice for us, He took upon Himself the sin of the world and faced the consequences on our behalf. Yet, to benefit from His death we must respond in faith, we must call upon Jesus for salvation. If we do, then we are 'justified' as Paul says. Justified can be understood as 'just-as-if I'd-never-sinned'; the sin that separates you from God and brings you under the judgment of God, is transferred to Jesus, ... and it leaves you in perfect, unspoiled, reconciled relationship with God, and it's upon that basis – the free gift offered in Jesus – that God, the judge, can declare us justified.

Friends, upon the cross of Jesus, the righteousness and love of God are perfectly balanced, and He waits with open arms to receive you back into relationship with Himself if you will but acknowledge your sin and receive forgiveness through Jesus. It's a choice we all face, just like Rahab had to. Would she continue listening to her culture - to the traditions, upbringing and influences around her? Or would she turn to the living God in faith and find life?

Brothers and sisters, friends, sometimes the Scriptures bring an uncomfortable word, speaking from their context into ours such that we might see afresh a fuller picture of the character of God. He is a loving Father and loves you enough that He gave His Son for you. But He is also holy and righteous, and He will not overlook sin forever, and so He will judge when the time comes.

I hope and pray that we each have put our faith in Jesus, receiving then the forgiveness and reconciliation He secured through His death for each of us.

Before we close our service, I feel it's important we take a moment to pray, so let us pray.