

Judges 6:1-23 – Face to Face with God

Imagine meeting God face to face? What would your reaction be? Would your reaction change depending on what was happening in your life at that time? Tonight, we're starting a journey through the story of Gideon in the book of Judges. It's quite a short story, being only 3 chapters long, but we're going to be looking at some big themes and, at times, it's going to be deeply challenging. There are going to be parts of this story that will leave us feeling very uncomfortable. It's all part of scripture and therefore it is worthy of being grappled with and taken seriously. I think, when we do, we will potentially see a lot of ourselves within this story but also, we'll have a chance to see God face to face and I wonder, after we've taken this journey through this story, what we would say to God?

So, let's start at the beginning and understand what's happening. So, we're way back in the history of the people of Israel. They've entered the promise land after leaving Egypt. Moses has died and so has his successor, Joshua. And now, there are a succession of Judges who don't rule over Israel but provide leadership especially in times of crisis. At the beginning of the story, we have crisis. "The Israelites have done evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. The Midianites are raiders, they ride on camels and plunder the land taking whatever they want. Israel is no match for them and so these are seven miserable years. As it says, they hide away and try and survive as best they can.

And it's within this survival mode that we find Gideon. Gideon is threshing wheat in a winepress. It's an unusual way to do it but it's a way of trying to get a job done, to prepare the crop without being spotted. It would have been pretty dusty and unpleasant. As Gideon goes about this task, so a visitor arrives.

"The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." ". Now, there are various responses to that statement that Gideon could have made but one part makes him bite back, "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." Gideon is saying, "you aren't with us, you've abandoned us".

I wonder, have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt like shouting at God, "where were you, I needed you and you weren't there!"

Note that God doesn't smite him for this show of anger. God's shoulders are broader than that. Instead, God carries on revealing the plan. The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" I imagine that Gideon is a mix of perplexed and angry. There's a sense of disbelief not that he's talking to God but that God doesn't seem to get the situation. "Parden? You're sending me and yet who I am, the least of the weakest of the weak!" Again, Gideon bites back and God doesn't strike him down. Instead, he gives two promises. "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive."

Now, we can see Gideon starting to calm down a bit now but with a sense of unreality arriving. Is this man speaking to him really God or God's angel? Is this just someone making fun of him? How can he believe anything that this stranger has told him. "If now I have found favour in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you." And off he trots and brings back a massive offering given the scarcity of food. He brings a loaf of bread from about 16 kilos of flour and a whole young goat and puts them on a rock near the tree as instructed. If it's not God, he loses nothing, he's just saved time later getting dinner ready for his family. On the other hand, well...

Well, the angel ouches it all with his staff and it's consumed in a fireball. Gideon's face would have been a picture! Any doubt that this truly was the Almighty in front of him vanishes in an instant. His anger and loose words vanish and he is stunned, "Alas, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!" You aren't really supposed to see God face to face, much like with ancient kings, ebbing in their presence was not necessarily a good thing and seeing them face to face could lead to certain doom. Anger is replaced with fear. What is going to happen with me?

He needn't be afraid though, words of reassurance arrive The Lord said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."

Imagine meeting with God. What emotion is it that dominates? In the New Testament reading we see Peter realising that sinful man though he is, he is in the presence of someone special from God. Fear is his dominant emotion, again replacing sharp words. But the response from Jesus is near identical, "Do not be afraid". When we think about meeting with God, is fear what looms large?

The truth is that there need be no fear within the presence of God. God is big enough to withstand our hard words, loving enough to forgive our failings and bold enough to use us within his plans. That is the beauty of our God. There is no need to be afraid of coming face to face with God. The ultimate way we come face to face is through prayer, so let us be bold in coming into his presence.