

Judges 6:25-32

What is the bravest thing you've ever done? Can you remember a time when you stood up for what is right even though it had the potential to cost you dear?

Tonight, we look at the moment Gideon stood up for God even though it had the potential to cost him his life. Last week we looked at the call of Gideon. Israel had wandered away from God and as a result God had allowed the Midianites to prosper. For seven years they had raided Israel and stripped it bare. But God chose Gideon, the least of the least, a man hiding in a winepress threshing the crop. Importantly, God had made two promises: "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive." And also left a reminder of his power – a scorched rock where Gideon had laid an offering. These are bold promises from God, God isn't going for half measures here. But the mission and the promises are not just about ridding Israel of an invading army, they are about restoring Israel to God. Gideon can only tackle the outside problem once he has dealt with the inward rot.

So, the first part of the plan - "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. Then build a proper kind of altar to the Lord your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering."

Asherah and Baal are Canaanite Gods, worshiped by the people who were in the land before Israel settled there. One of the principal ways of worshiping Baal and Asherah was through human sacrifice and principally the sacrifice of children. In other words, this is a pretty grim place. And it's here that we discover something else – the altar and pole for these Gods belong to Gideon's father. This is not just a national problem for Gideon, this is a person family problem. The bull was a symbol of Baal and was reserved for a village feast. What was going on at this shrine was no half-hearted thing, it would have required devotion and fanaticism. To stand up against it and tear it down would have been a big statement.

God tells Gideon to do it and so Gideon does. It says that he was too afraid to do it during the day but practically, he wouldn't have had a hope of succeeding whilst people were watching! Gideon takes 10 servants along to help, this is a big job, and overnight the demolition, rebuild and offer a sacrifice to God.

What's the bravest thing you've ever done?

I wonder what the people in the village noticed first. The missing bull? The smell of the burning bull? The destruction of their precious altar? Either way, there is uproar and a call for blood to be spilled and it wouldn't have taken long in a small town to work out who had done it. The people of the town demanded of Joash, "Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it."

There's a mystery here though. Instead of handing over his son, Joash defends him. "Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar." Joash, the owner of an altar to Baal, seemingly rejects the god's he has been worshipping.

When we dig into the text later on, we might find a clue why. In chapter 8 once Gideon has captured some of the Midianite leaders, it turns out that these men had killed Gideon's brothers in one of the raids. Is Gideon then the last of Joash's sons? If that is right, then Joash has nothing to lose by defending his son. If Gideon dies then so would the family line. But we come to that at a later sermon. Whatever it is, though I think we have to say because God's hand was in it, Gideon survives and is given a new name, "Jerub-Baal", "Let Baal contend with him."

When we think about how this applies to us, maybe a way to start would be to wonder what would have happened if Gideon hadn't acted that night? Could he have faced down the Midianites if the inner rot hadn't been dealt with? The answer is probably no. It needed a decisive act of someone brave enough to take the bull by the horns, so to speak.

Jonathon Sack, in his book "morality" ponders about the state of western society. It should be a leading light to the nations, epitomising freedom, dignity, compassion and rights and yet, something is deeply not right with western society. Populism has surged in politics; rates of alcoholism, suicide, drug abuse and self-harm are skyrocketing; deep and growing inequality has become normalised; we are in the midst of a climate crisis. There is a rot at the heart of society. I'm sure we have all heard the phrase, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men (and women) to do nothing,". For society to be transformed requires brave people to take a stand, to take a stand in the name of Jesus, to stand against those things which are in opposition to God's ways, regardless of the personal cost.

Are we prepared to be brave for God, to take a stand in his name and so work with God in redeeming the world?