

## Judges 8a – Gideon part 5

So far the story of Gideon may have been challenging and full of some odd and funny things but I don't think it will have made us uncomfortable enough to squirm. This week's reading and next weeks and definitely uncomfortable and will leave us with a sense of unease. So, tonight, we're going to do two things. We'll look at the passage and what it can teach us but we'll also touch on some of the ethics of what is happening.

Let's look at the passage and what we see.

The first lesson we learn is that God does keep his promises.

The whole story of Gideon is about God calling this young man to defeat the Midianites. Humanly, it is an impossible thing to do. Gideon has no military experience, Israel is vastly outnumbered and you can't even call it a David versus Goliath situation, Goliath was nothing compared to the Midianite hoards. But here we see victory fulfilled. The main rout of the Midianites happened in a valley with Gideon and his 300 men surrounding them. At that point it seemed that Gideon didn't have to do too much fighting, the Midianites were confused enough to do the work themselves! But after, Gideon pursues the remnants and captures the leaders. God's promise of victory has been fulfilled. Gideon has been the salvation figure through whom God has worked.

The second lesson is about the faithlessness of people.

Despite the clear sign that God is working through Gideon and that through Gideon Israel would be redeemed, time and again we see grumbles and opposition from those who should have been supporting Gideon. It starts with the Ephraimites, "Now the Ephraimites asked Gideon, "Why have you treated us like this? Why didn't you call us when you went to fight Midian?" And they challenged him vigorously." I suspect there is more going on that meets the eye here. My suspicion is that the Ephraimites were less interested in fighting and more interested in the aftermath. If you beat your enemy in battle, the spoils of war are yours. The Midianite army would have been a vast source of plunder. But because they hadn't fought, the Law stated that they could have no share. As ever, greed plays its part.

To honour Gideon, at this point he responds well and humbly and defuses the situation. As Proverbs says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger".

Then there are the people of Sukkoth and Peniel. Fortified towns that should have been a source of help and refreshment for Gideon and his men turn them away. This is not just insulting Gideon, it is not just ignoring the custom of hospitality, it is actively aiding the enemy. The people of Sukkoth and Peniel were more interested in self-preservation than looking to see the work that God was doing around them. And the world is the same today, people are more interested in looking after themselves than joining in the work of God in the world.

But it's at this point we get a real moment of discomfort. After winning the war, Gideon does three things. He goes back to Succoth and beats the elders with thorns and briers, he tears down the tower of Peniel and kills the men of the town and then he tries to get his son to execute the two captured Midianite leaders. Reading about battles is one thing but this seems so cross a line. So how do we begin to square what we see in the Bible with what we believe about God. How do we begin to comprehend the morality or lack of it?

I'm not going to pretend to give you all the answers tonight. Even with a whole sermon series, I wouldn't give you all the answers. And that's because I don't have all the answers. There are just some moments that seem incomprehensible. But...

Firstly, there is a danger in judging what we read by our own code of morality. How people see the world and judge the world changes over the years. We're looking at stories that happened over 3000 years ago. Imagine how people will look back at our lives in 3000 years and how they will judge our actions. I don't for one minute think that they will judge them favourably. They will be horrified and ask where the morality is.

Secondly, just because it happened doesn't mean that God approves of it. There's a mistake that is easy to make to assume that because it happened in the Bible it therefore has the full approval of God. I don't think that is true. We're not reading about robots under the instruction of God. We are looking at real people like you and me who are capable of making good and bad choices. You look at Gideon's choices at the end here and you seem to see an overstepping of the mark. Asking his son to kill the two enemy leaders seems more about trying to humiliate two men at the moment of their deaths than fulfilling the work of God.

Thirdly, and this follows on, God is capable of working through the good of human actions and he's also capable of working through the bad of human actions. Let's face it, if he only worked through the good actions of people, there'd be times he simply wasn't able to do anything at all. But God can use all sorts of situations for the working of his plans. God's ultimate aim is for all people to repent of their sins and return to him. God doesn't stay remote and distant but he rolls up his sleeves and gets involved in the muck and grime of human existence.

And he does this with one aim, to keep his promises. And his greatest promise is that he will defeat the powers of evil in this world. He will set us free from all that harms us and he will welcome us into his new kingdom – a place without pain or death.