

Little Known People 2: JEPHTHAH

Judges 11:1-11 [MW20-27]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 19 July 2020

Today is the second part of our brief dip into 'Judges'

- ever read Judges?
 - it's a pretty revealing book
 - gives an all too close to home account of human nature
- kind of lays everything bare, motives, loyalties, treachery, faithlessness and faithfulness

It reminds me of something I learnt on my study leave a few years ago

- there are basically two types of stories
 - 'parent' stories and 'grandparent' stories
- Parent stories give you the 'sanitised', cleaned up version of family history
 - mistakes and indiscretions are glossed over, stories are moralistic and preachy
 - they are also usually boring and lay heavy expectations and burdens on the hearer
- Grandparent stories tell it like it really was
 - they open the door and all the skeletons come tumbling out
- they tell the whole story, warts and all
 - and because of this they are interesting and fun, sad and tragic
- these stories are also usually lifegiving because they talk about people like us
 - they are hopeful, because if those people did that and survived
- so can we!

The Bible is full of 'grandparent' stories - thank goodness!

- and Judges especially so, take this morning's episode
 - I think if you were Jephthah, you'd want the end of this story conveniently lost!

There are three main players in this particular drama

- Jephthah, Jephthah's daughter, God
 - I guess you can't be God
- so we have a choice to identify with Jephthah or his daughter
 - and see what we can learn from them?

Remember the background against which the drama of Judges is played

- people turn away from God, God hands them over to be treated harshly
 - life is miserable and the people cry out for help
- God raises up a leader who delivers them
 - things are fine for a while, then the people turn away from God ...

So, was Jephthah a good guy or a bad guy?

- is he worthy of our admiration in any way?
 - what is his claim to fame?
- you be the judge!

Jephthah was the son of a prostitute

- his half brothers drove him out saying he didn't belong
 - and wasn't going to get any of the family goodies
- so he had to make a new life in a different country
 - where he built up a good reputation as a brave warrior and leader

When the people started having trouble with the Ammonites

- the elders sought out Jephthah and asked for his help
- he wasn't too sure at first but when they agreed to make him their ruler
- he said sure thing, count me in

Now Jephthah doesn't just charge off and start laying into the Ammonites

- first thing he does is try to negotiate with the King of Ammon
- the leader of the dudes who've been giving God's people a hard time
- Jephthah demonstrates great ability in presenting persuasive arguments about conflicting claims to the land and why they should be left alone
- unfortunately the Ammonite King is not having a bar of it
- however Jephthah proves himself to be a very able
- if not always successful, negotiator (remember that)

The King of Ammon says, you fellas better get out of here. Now!

- Jephthah says, not likely mate!
- and you know what's going to happen next ...
- in Judges 11:29 we read that the Spirit of the Lord took control of Jephthah
- and he went through Gilead and Manasseh raising an army
- so there they were, ready to take on the bad guys

What do you think of Jephthah so far - marks out of ten?

It's the next verses that are the tricky, sticky, prickly ones ...

- we might expect this particular story to follow the pattern of the rest of Judges
- the defeat of those nasty and troublesome Ammonites being the climax,
- the highlight, the main point, yet that's all over in just two (two!) verses, 32 and 33
- the real tension, the real climax and main point
- is a vow that Jephthah makes in verses 30 and 31:
- here are the words of Jephthah's promise to God in plain English from the CEV
- If you will let me defeat the Ammonites and come home safely,*
- I will sacrifice to you whoever comes out to meet me first*

Now Jephthah was wise in other ways

- he's obviously a good military leader
- he has good general knowledge, as he showed speaking with the King of Ammon
- did he not see the dangers of this 'open ended' vow?
- why do you think he made this promise?
- how's Jephthah doing now - marks out of ten?

There are at least three points of view on this unwise promise:

- Jephthah has received God's Spirit, that should be all he needs
- making this vow means he does not yet trust God sufficiently
- the vow is made under God's Spirit so making it is okay
- faithful Israelites frequently made promises to God
- the problem is the careless wording
- promising to offer whoever came to meet him as a sacrifice
- what Jephthah should have done is promise to build an altar
- or something like that

The view I favour says that Jephthah's promise violates a deeply held Israelite norm in regard to prohibiting gifts or bribes to judges

- it's as if Jephthah has received God's Spirit as a gift of strength and now makes this vow as a bribe to influence God's decision as judge in order to guarantee victory over the Ammonites

Anyway, Jephthah duly defeats the dastardly enemy

- happy and on a high, whistling a merry tune, he returns home nearing his driveway he remembers: oh, yes, that promise I made ... who will come down the driveway to meet him ... cat, dog, mother-in-law, goat?
- nope, none of those, in traditional style Jephthah's daughter comes dancing down the driveway singing a delightful victory chant ...
- a touching scene isn't it?
Jephthah's daughter laughing and singing and dancing
- how's she doing so far, marks out of ten?

Jephthah doesn't even say, hello, thank you, her name, good to see you

- what does he say? "Oh!" Just oh!
OH indeed, O H = Oh Hell!
- listen to what he says to his daughter:
You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me
- like it's her fault - yeah right!
do you perhaps wish to revise Jephthah's mark out of ten???

How does Jephthah's unnamed daughter respond?

- with amazing grace and acceptance
not Oh hell, but oh well ...
let me have two months alone with my girl friends
- then let the promise take its course
she dutifully accepts her fate for the sake of her father and Israel's security

For this Jephthah's daughter should at least be named, have her name go down in history

- on the other hand should she have been so meek, submissive
acquiescent to her father's foolishness?

You can just imagine it happening today ...

- Jephthah arrives home, no one comes out to greet him
inside he says hello to his daughter who ignores him
- oh, by the way I've promised to sacrifice you
the daughter hardly looks up from painting her toe nails:
"you've made a vow to *your* God ... oh please! Leave me alone and get out!"

Should Jephthah's daughter have fought, argued, refused?

- would we like to revise her mark out of ten?

Remember we have seen that Jephthah is a very able negotiator

- should he have tried to negotiate with God?
*Ah, God, um, er, look, about that vow ... I was nervous, rush of blood to the head ...
Let's forget about it eh? Can't forget, okay then, how about this: take me -
I've seen something of life, she's so young and has everything ahead of her ...*

But ... nothing

- he doesn't raise a finger, say a word to try and save his daughter

So what becomes of Jephthah's unnamed daughter?

- does she become a hero for meekly accepting her fate?
hardly
- but she does have a kind of recognition
in the four days annually Israelite girls were said to spend mourning for her
- don't know how long that continued though

What do you think happened to Jephthah's daughter?

Some argue that Jephthah did not actually kill her, but dedicated her to a life of celibacy

- Christian scholars associated the medieval practice of nuns vowing their lives in celibate service to God, with the model of Jephthah's daughter
- Handel in his oratorio *Jephthah* followed this line
of the daughter being dedicated to God in pure and virgin state for ever
- verse 39 just says Jephthah did what he promised
and his daughter never got married
- so, did he or didn't he???

It is, to put not too fine a point on it, ambiguous

- you pay your money and you take your choice, have a dollar each way
this ambiguity seems to be deliberate
- in order to draw us in
to get us to wrestle with the moral dilemmas and ambiguities of the story

This central ambiguity of the entire story - whether Jephthah killed his daughter or not

- reflects the overall ambiguity of Jephthah's character
whether he sacrificed his daughter or not
his vow remains foolish, wrong and unnecessary
- yet the Spirit of God came upon him
and he did deliver the people from Ammonite oppression

In the larger scheme of things though, by this time in the saga of Judges

- things have moved from good and faithful judges like Deborah
to tragic and ultimately failed judges
- the story of Jephthah and his daughter serves to illustrate that the system
is breaking down

Just to round off, Jephthah goes on to deal treacherously with fellow Israelites

- of the tribe of Ephraim, killing 42,000
Jephthah judged Israel for six years before he died
and was buried in his hometown Mizpah

There is one more player to look at in this tragedy ...the Lord God

- what sort of God would allow this to happen?
marks out of ten for God?

One commentator says:

Certain tensions emerge in attempting to understand the nature of God's involvement in the events of Jephthah's story

- sure got that right!

God vows never again to deliver Israel because of repeated disloyalty

- yet God cannot bear to see Israel suffer
and works through Jephthah, even though Jephthah negotiates his own rise to power
and is not initially called by God, as were all the other judges before

There is a sense too that God is somehow more distant

- God remains involved
and yet seems to be growing increasingly frustrated with Israel
- more willing to allow the Israelites to go on a misguided course
and suffer the consequences
- the elders choose the son of a prostitute as a judge - God allows it
Jephthah makes a foolish vow - God allows it
God does not intervene to save the daughter, as he did with Abraham and Isaac
- perhaps a reminder that God allows people to suffer the tragic consequences
of their own rebellious actions and sin?

So, marks out of ten for God?

There is a lot going on here in the story of Jephthah, his daughter and the Ammonites!

- like life it is full of ambiguity, mixed motives, hazy messages
and like all good grand parent stories
no one comes out squeaky clean - not even God!
- as well, as in all good grand parent stories, there is something we can learn
it may be a lesson of 'what to do when ...'
or it may be 'what most definitely not to do'!

The story of Jephthah, his daughter and the Lord God

- highlights the importance of engaging your brain
before putting your mouth into gear
reminds us of the ever present danger of 'foot in mouth disease'
- warns us of the danger of rash promises
and to be careful what you pray, because you might get it

The story of Jephthah, his daughter and the Lord God also shows that somehow

- in the midst of all this, the Lord God is there in a way that in the long term
is ultimately life-giving
- giving us an opportunity to reconsider our priorities
mature in our decision making
and grow in faith

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father

We thank you for calling us to be your servants.

Help us to gladly respond to your call and obey your will.

Make us ready for every demand you make on our lives,

that we may serve you faithfully

and show forth your love to the world.

Amen.