

## Encountering God

Judges 4:1-7, 17-22

Matthew 25:14-30

A few years back I was preaching at another congregation where one woman said she refused to read the Old Testament. She saw the Old Testament understanding of God as one that was angry, judgemental, full of punishment. It was an understanding that was markedly different to what she saw as the God that Jesus worshipped. Now, this is one of the first controversies that the church dealt with – possibly before the end of the first century – and it reflects a selective reading of the Old Testament text.

However, the book of Judges, which only features in the lectionary on this one Sunday in the cycle, is one of those books that lends weight to that perspective. There is a repeated pattern of peace in the land, the people forget God, God punishes them with an invasion, the people remember God, and so God rescues them. It is easy to read this as a harsh and judgmental God who is waiting to catch the people out and punish them.

There are other people who don't like Judges because it is one of those books that is often used to justify the subjugation of the Palestinian people by the State of Israel. The thinking is approximately that if we affirm this book, then we also need to affirm the claim by Israel to all the land being promised to them by God. Fortunately, both these approaches are rather simplistic views (and yes, I have constructed them both as a "straw man") that fails to understand both the book of Judges and the Old Testament as a whole.

Judges came into its current form around the time of the exile and is part of a series of texts written by one school of thought that stretches from Deuteronomy through to Kings (but not including Ruth, which is later still). It seeks to make sense of the experience of the Exile. In particular, in a world where gods were territorial and operated much like the warlords of the day in that after a war, the victor's gods had taken over the territory of the vanquished, how could they continue to worship Yahweh when they were not only defeated, but they were taken out of Yahweh's land. The solution to the conundrum came in many different theologies, but one of these was to say that Yahweh allowed it to happen because the people had not been faithful. This is the theme that we see repeated again and again through this series of books.

However, Judges stands out amongst all the books of the Bible for two important reasons. If we continued onto the poetry of chapter 5, which tells the same story as a victory song, we would be reading one of the oldest parts of the Bible. The Hebrew writing is archaic compared to the rest of the book. So we see glimpses into early Hebrew life.

The other reason is (and apparently, for I haven't counted them) has 19 women who are significant characters in Judges, which is more than any other book of the Bible. I won't say we see equality in Judges, but we are

closer than anywhere else. We also see women in significant roles of leadership, as we do in today's story.

In today's story we hear of two women saving Israel, and they can be compared with the two men, one who is too afraid to take the leadership to which he is called and the other who dishonours all the traditions of hospitality that were common to the Ancient Near East, which leads to his death. Both the men and the women in this story act in the opposite to their stereotypes: The women are the heroes, the men are afraid. This story paints an image of God who does not worry about human perceptions of who is called to which role. Indeed, this is an understanding of God who is full of surprises.

Throughout Judges we are never told what it means that the people "did evil in the sight of the Lord" but later books give more detail as the poor, the vulnerable, widows and orphans are oppressed by those with political and social power. This is not a god of punishment and retribution, but rather one who stands firmly on the side of the oppressed.

Who are the oppressed or vulnerable today? We can look at the situation in the Middle East and with the propaganda on both sides can find it easy to be drawn into siding with one or the other. We see perpetrators of violence on both sides of the conflict. We also see the innocent being injured and killed on both sides. How do we stand with the vulnerable in such a situation?

And it is also worth reflecting on who are the vulnerable in our society. Some of us encounter such people as we go about our daily lives. Sometimes we might not know we are doing so. Perhaps we too are called to be like Deborah or Jael in stepping beyond our comfort zone or what our society says is acceptable to be part of the solution.

As our Gospel story reminds us, the way in which we understand God shapes our behaviour both towards God and other people. It also shapes our attitudes towards the gifts God has given us. So I invite you to reflect on your understanding of God. How does it shape the way that you relate to other people, especially to the vulnerable who have God's special concern? What might this mean for your life and the gifts you offer into this community?