

GIDEON AND THE FLEECE

Judges 6:11–16, 33–40

For the past two weeks we've been looking at Joshua and the entry into the promised land. In today's reading we move on to another hero of faith, Gideon. I say we move on, but the reality is that it's more like moving back. God's people were in trouble again, not the dire circumstances of slavery in Egypt but suffering, fear and oppression from their enemies.

After the thrilling stories we've read in Joshua the beginning of Judges chapter 6 comes as a bit of a shock. 'For seven years the LORD gave the Israelites into the hands of the Midianites. Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys.'

The boot was well and truly on the other foot now. What is amazing is that statement that it was the LORD who gave the Israelites into the hands of the Midianites. When we go back to verse 1, though, the reason emerges. 'Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.'

Instead of commitment there was compromise. In chapter 1 we read of victories for some of the tribes but their success was only partial. They opted to live side by side with their enemies and in time they stopped worshipping the LORD and followed and worshipped the various gods of the people around them.

When they lost touch with the LORD they soon lost touch with each other. The tribes just went their own way and did their own thing. Instead of twelve tribes cooperating as one nation it was just twelve tribes doing their own thing and looking after their own interests. As a result they were weak and easily overpowered by their enemies.

Judges chapter 5 celebrates the victory of Deborah in a song. 'The people of Zebulun risked their very lives; so did Naphtali on the heights of the field.' But alongside the good news of those valiant tribes we read this. 'In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he linger by the ships? Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves.'

There's a principle here that runs right through the Bible and into the New Testament. It links our relationship with God and our relationship with one another. Love God and love one another. The writer to the Hebrews has this to say. 'Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.' And again: 'Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.' This was what Paul wrote to the Philippians. 'Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.'

The Israelites lost touch with God. They began to worship false gods. They began to behave in the evil ways of the people around them. And they lost all concern for one another. They became selfish and uncaring. All this made them weak and vulnerable to the attacks of their enemies.

What's happening in our Christian lives? Are we moving on or are we moving back? Does the Lord come first in our lives or are we secretly worshipping false gods? Are we concerned for one another or are we only interested in ourselves? When we lose touch with God and with one another we are in great danger; we are vulnerable to the attacks of Satan.

This is the background to the story of Gideon. Although the people had abandoned the LORD he had not abandoned them. Yes, he allowed them to suffer but that was also part of his plan, to show them their need and to win them back to himself.

Both Joshua and Gideon are mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11 as heroes of faith. They both saw God at work in miraculous ways. The miracles which Joshua witnessed could be called national miracles. They were for the whole people of Israel: the parting of the River Jordan and the collapse of the walls of Jericho. We could also call them historic miracles. They served as a witness to the power of God for all subsequent generations.

The miracles which Gideon experienced were different. They were more in the nature of personal miracles. They were not given as a demonstration of power to the whole nation but as a reassurance to just one man, Gideon. God had a great task for Gideon but he took some convincing.

Judges chapter 6 verses 11 to 17 describe a conversation between Gideon and the angel of the LORD.

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." "But sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian." 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?" "But Lord," Gideon asked, "how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together." Gideon replied, "If now I have found favour in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me.

Gideon has been described as the Old Testament equivalent of Thomas in the New Testament. He was full of questions and doubts. Some of them were doubts about God. Some of them were doubts about himself. In order to deal with his doubts he asked God to give him a sign, and God did so.

The sign which Gideon was given was pretty convincing. Gideon brought an offering of food and the angel told him to place it on a rock. The angel then touched the food with the tip of the staff he was carrying and fire flared from the rock and burnt up the offering.

Verses 24 to 32 are all about what Gideon did. He did two significant things. He built an altar to the LORD and he tore down the altar to Baal. Getting right with God always involves these two things: building up and tearing down.

Verse 33 is all about what the enemies did. 'Now all the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the Valley of Jezreel.'

But verse 34 is all about what God did. 'Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon.'

Gideon summoned an army and prepared to do battle but still he had doubts. This is where we come to the familiar story of the fleece. Verses 36 to 38: 'Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised — look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said."

And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.'

Gideon went on to ask God for another sign. Verses 39 to 40: 'Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew." That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.'

It has been pointed out that the first sign is more easy to explain in natural terms. The ground might well dry out more quickly. But the second sign, where the ground remained wet but the fleece was dry, defies natural explanation.

What lesson are we to take from this? Is it legitimate to seek guidance from God in such a way? Does God grant personal miracles that are just for the individual?

I don't find a parallel for this anywhere else in scripture. No one else in the Bible seemed to believe that this was a divinely ordained way of getting guidance, and so it's not one that I recommend. What it does teach, however, is that the Lord cares for us as individuals, that he has a plan for our lives, and that he can work miracles that are just for us.

I can think of two occasions in my own life when God worked for me in a way that I can only describe as miraculous. It wasn't that he altered the laws of nature. It wasn't walking on the water, or anything like that. But on each occasion it was a sign that was just for me. Let me tell you about just one of them.

It was when I was a very young Christian in 1960. My local football team was Dunfermline Athletic, a yoyo team, relegated one season, promoted the next, relegated again, and so on. That year they were heading for certain relegation. The only way they could avoid the drop was by winning every remaining match.

I was a new Christian and so in my simple faith I prayed that they would win. The first match, they did. So I prayed again, and again they won. I prayed every week for the rest of the season and they won every single game, and to everyone's surprise avoided relegation.

The next season they had a long run in the Scottish Cup. I kept praying and they got to the final. It was against Celtic. They had no chance, but I kept praying. The final was a goalless draw and so they had to play again the next week. Celtic threw everything at them but the goalkeeper was inspired. He pulled off save after save, impossible saves. To everyone's amazement the first team to score was Dunfermline, and that's how it ended. They won the cup. The city of Dunfermline went wild.

Did God answer the prayers of a little boy who had just become a Christian? As long as I live you will never persuade me otherwise. Of course, there was another explanation. My prayers just happened to coincide with the appointment of a new manager at the club. His name was Jock Stein, one of the best managers of the modern era, who was to go on to even greater honours with bigger clubs.

Now before you rush to sign me up as chaplain at Coventry City FC let me say that I wouldn't pray that kind of prayer today. But the Lord does know each of us individually. He does care about us. He even does exceptional things just for us when it's his will to do so.

Take a reality check on your spiritual life today, your relationship with God, your relationship with other Christians, your faith. But most of all, take a reality check on the Lord himself. Cast care aside, lean on thy Guide; His boundless mercy will provide; Lean, and the trusting soul shall prove Christ is its life, and Christ its love.