

**SERMON – 22/9/24**  
**'The Battle of Jericho'**

Introduction

This is now our fifth Sunday reading through the Book of Joshua. A couple of weeks ago Brenda very helpfully explored the story of Rahab (and we will meet her again this morning) and last Sunday Alex helped us reflect on where we have come from and where we are going as God's people. Today we are looking at the famous Battle of Jericho and while most of us probably have a vague recollection of it we are likely to have ignored just how hard a passage this is, so this morning I want to give this morning's sermon in two parts, beginning by talking through the narrative of what happened at Jericho before reading a few verses from the end of the story and reflecting on its message for us today.

As the old spiritual puts it: "Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down" - what a great story of victory and triumph at the Lord's hands, a fantastic start to the conquest of the Promised Land.

So first of all we are told that news of the people of Israel crossing the River Jordan without getting their feet wet spread amongst the Amorite and Canaanite peoples who lived between the Jordan and the Mediterranean and their hearts melted with fear. So far, so good, from the point of view of the Israelites. For their own part they consecrated themselves afresh to the Lord, making a cairn of 12 stones taken one by each tribe from the middle of the river bed, circumcising all those who had not been circumcised during the forty years of wilderness wandering, and celebrating the Feast of Passover (the Old Testament precursors to what we celebrate in Baptism and in the Lord's Supper). For the last time that day the people of Israel received the manna from heaven that had sustained them since the Exodus and for the first time they ate the produce of the Promised Land.

Let me read the closing verses of ch.5.

"Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." Then Joshua fell face down to the ground in

reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?"

The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so." (Josh.5:13-15)

And God gives the plan for the Battle of Jericho is given to Joshua along with the promise of victory. The city was barricaded and ready for a siege. For six days the ark of the covenant was to be led round the city with the army following round. On the seventh day they were to march round not once but seven times with the priests blowing on trumpets made from rams' horns. Finally, when the priests gave a long blast on the trumpets the whole army was to give a loud shout.

For six days they marched to the sound of the trumpets without giving a war cry or raising their voices. But on the seventh day, when they had marched round seven times, the priests gave a long blast on the trumpets, the whole army gave a shout and the walls of the city simply collapsed allowing the Israelites to charge in and take the city.

Now, that is the story that most of us will have in the back of our minds but now we will read what happens in the end

Reading: Joshua 6:17-19

"The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury."

Sermon

"The city and all that is in it is to be devoted to the Lord."  
(Joshua 6:17)

So without the firing of a shot, but only with the silent march of those who acknowledged the presence of the Lord Almighty with them day after day, and with one final shout, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. As the prophet Zechariah would proclaim

many centuries later: "Not by might, not by power but by my Spirit, says the Lord." (Zech 4:6) The army of the people of Israel charged in and took the city. What a great story, what a truly memorable victory, right up there with the mighty acts of God in history. And what a really important message there is in that for us as Christians. Too often we seek to advance God's Kingdom by planning our own strategies and working to what we perceive as our own strengths, but God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not our ways. Rather than seeking to capitalise on the fear that was upon the people of Jericho by rushing in to lay siege to the city, God told His people to wait upon Him day by day for a week without so much as saying a word never mind taking up a sword. Let's have a committee meeting we say, let's set up a task group, let's follow the latest ideas, let's appoint our most able people.

"Not by might, not by power but by my Spirit, says the Lord." Or as the psalmist puts it: "I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. Put your hope in the LORD." (Psalm 130:5-7) In the purposes of God, the first thing is not the planning group or the task force but the prayer meeting. And the walls came tumbling down, the army charged in and took the city.

But... what then?

"The city and all that is in it is to be devoted to the Lord," commanded Joshua. Now the footnote in my Bible explains that that word 'devoted' or 'consecrated' represents a Hebrew term (the word is  $\text{קָדַשׁ}$ ) that refers to 'the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the Lord, often by totally destroying them.' Don't let's beat about the bush here. The elephant in the room is that what followed the fall of Jericho was nothing other than the complete annihilation of its population, what we might today term ethnic cleansing or genocide. And don't let's try and sugar-coat the fact that in the taking of the rest of the Promised Land that is what is commanded of the people of God until the land is theirs and is wholly consecrated to the Lord.

Now I absolutely get why many people struggle with this kind of thing in the Old Testament which is why I want to address it head

on this morning. First of all, it's important to say that we should not read the Old Testament without New Testament spectacles on. It was written in a context that has been turned upside down by the coming into the world of Jesus Christ and the kind of things we read here are descriptive of what happened then rather than prescriptive for what should happen now. We need to learn the spiritual lesson of devotion and consecration as individuals and as a church rather than getting hung up on the brutality of an age that belongs in the past.

Because, secondly, don't let's be arrogant enough to believe that we live in a more civilised world today than the one we have read about this morning. In the news media we learn day after day of levels of massacre and bloodshed and annihilation that makes the Battle of Jericho seem like a picnic – in Israel and Palestine and Lebanon, in Ukraine and Russia, in Myanmar, in Yemen, in Sudan – and that's before we even scratch the surface of Hitler's Third Reich or Stalin's Pogroms or Pol Pot's Cambodia or 1990s Rwanda.

Hard though it is to read and reflect on, the story of the Battle of Jericho actually reveals several examples of how the people of God showed a very different way than the way of the world in their day. Two weeks ago we looked at the story of the unlikely heroine, Rahab, the prostitute, who protected the two men whom Joshua had sent to spy out the city. As the city was taken, their promise to spare her and her household was faithfully kept, and they were given refuge outside the camp of Israel. As Brenda pointed out a fortnight ago, this same Rahab appears in the opening verses of the New Testament as one of the ancestors of Jesus, the great-great-grandmother of King David.

Again, while we see the expected looting of spoil by the victorious Israelites, what marks their behaviour out as different from most armies in history is that the treasures they took – the silver and gold and articles of bronze and iron – they did not keep for themselves but devoted to God, handing them over to the treasury of the Lord's house.

So, without wanting in any way to glorify this brutal story, I do want to press home the three simple messages that hold true for us as Christians today as we seek to live distinctively for God in

our time. Firstly, that we are called to devote ourselves, to consecrate ourselves entirely to God. The Book of Acts describes the first Christians as not claiming any of their possessions as their own but sharing everything they had, bringing their gifts freely to lay at the apostles' feet for distribution to any who were in need (Acts 4:32-35) That's what it means to live generously.

Secondly, that we are called to be true to our word, to be faithful in fulfilling our promises, as Joshua and the spies were to Rahab and her household. That's what it means to live faithfully.

And thirdly, probably most importantly of all, to live not by might or by power but by the Spirit, not by committee or ingenuity or human skill but by faith and by waiting upon God. That's what it means to live devotedly. Whatever Jericho lies ahead of us as individuals or as a church, we can be sure that as we put our trust in God the walls will come tumbling down.