

SERMON – 29/9/24
'Taking God for Granted'

“Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies.” (Joshua 7:11,12)

So, the conquest of the Promised Land is underway. What a story so far. A dramatic crossing of the River Jordan dry-shod, a pausing to look back with gratitude and forward in faith, and then the spectacular God-given victory over apparently impregnable Jericho when the walls come tumbling down at nothing more than a shout. So far, so good. What could possibly go wrong?

Perhaps you have found yourself in that position personally. God has blessed you abundantly, your prayers have been answered, you are full of faith and hope for the future and you feel on top of the world. Well, if you've been in that position, then you will know what can possibly go wrong, because it almost certainly will have, and you yourself will almost certainly have been the cause of your own downfall. Does it sound familiar? Of course it does, because there are patterns here that anyone who has ever tried to walk with God will recognise, and it's these patterns that I would like to explore with you this morning together with the lessons that we can (and must) learn from them both as individuals and as God's family, the Church.

We're not told how much time has passed but it probably wasn't very long. Ai is only a day or two's walk from Jericho, albeit quite a climb (from about 250m below sea-level to 750m above sea-level). As we read this morning Joshua had again sent spies ahead to reconnoitre and these men had returned indicating that there wouldn't be much resistance and that the whole army didn't have to be involved. This even tallies with the name of the city, because the name Ai literally means 'a ruin'. And so, perhaps buoyed by the ease with which they had overwhelmed mighty Jericho, Joshua sends a force of just 3000 soldiers to do the deed.

But what a disaster. The people of Ai send them packing with their tails between their legs.

Pride comes before a fall, we sometimes say, and most of us have some experience of that, because when we think a task is going to be straightforward or even easy that's often the time we fall flat on our faces because we have not prepared ourselves properly. When I was a probationer the minister I was serving under often used to say that the day he went out to do 'just another' service or 'just another' meeting or 'just another' funeral was the day he should walk away from ministry, and I've always remembered that. None of us can take for granted that just because we've been successful in some task before is no guarantee that we will necessarily succeed again.

And there is an element of that about what happens in our reading this morning – we can never take for granted that past victories will be repeated, particularly if we are relying on our own abilities rather than trusting in God's provision – that's a really important lesson for all of us to learn. But I also want to dig a little deeper into what happened at Ai because there are actually a number of underlying problems.

First of all, just to probe that basic theme a little further, we need to recognise that one of the greatest challenges to walking by faith is the temptation of self-confidence. Joshua was probably buzzing after the Battle of Jericho, and with him the elders of the people, and the fighting men and indeed all Israel. God had promised them this land flowing with milk and honey and even though Canaan was occupied by formidable opponents, God had miraculously given Jericho into their hands. But the point is that it was *God* who won the victory at Jericho and the people were triumphant only insofar as they trusted God. The city was given into the hands of the Israelites before they ever lifted a sword and where Joshua and the people went so wrong in attacking Ai was that they trusted in themselves, not in God – they thought it would be a walk in the park and that because the city was already pretty much a ruin they could rely on their own human strength to carry the day, effectively just taking God for granted.

We must not forget that prior to the Battle of Jericho, Joshua had led the people in an act of solemn consecration, pausing to remember God's faithfulness to them in the past by setting up a cairn of stones, by circumcising those who had not been circumcised and by celebrating the Passover. By sharp contrast in preparation for the Battle of Ai, Joshua simply adopted the tactics of a military commander, weighing up the report of the spies and adopting very human strategies for taking the city. There is no mention even of a perfunctory prayer, not even a nod in God's direction before the expeditionary force is sent off to be routed.

The inward sign of outward self-confidence is an attitude of prayerlessness that I venture to suggest is the greatest danger we face as individual Christians and as a church. Most of us go about our tasks with never a thought of God because we self-confidently think we are pretty capable most of the time and we only turn to God when things start to go pear-shaped, as we will see in a moment that Joshua does.

Jesus Himself teaches us to pray *each day* for our daily bread and never to expect that even the simplest things can be taken as given. Although we gather this morning to give thanks for God's faithfulness and generosity towards us in the provision of a fruitful harvest, how many of us actually involve God in any way in the business of supplying our tables with food, until the day we find Sainsbury's has run out of toilet rolls (or whatever must-have item is on our shopping list) and we declare a national emergency. Jesus said, "Seek *first* God's Kingdom and His righteousness and all the other things will be given to you as well." Don't most of us just take God for granted?

All of us will have tasks lined up to perform in the coming week. How many of us expect to succeed in those tasks through nothing more than our own abilities and how many of us will be on our knees tonight seeking God's enabling for the day ahead?

But there is a further underlying problem that contributes to the disaster at Ai and that can also have a serious impact on the success or otherwise of any one of us as we seek to walk with God. Topping and tailing this chapter (though we did not actually

read it all during the service) is the story of Achan, the son of Karmi, the son of Zimri of the clan of Zerah in the tribe of Judah. As we saw last week, the armies of Israel were commanded not to take any spoil for themselves when Jericho was defeated but to bring it to devote to the Lord in the treasury. While, overall, that command seems to have been heeded, this one man thought it wouldn't matter if he took something for himself. From the way he describes it in the second half of the chapter (the part we didn't read earlier), he is captivated by a beautiful robe from Babylonia – perhaps he takes it out of a desire to give his wife a stunning gift (who knows) but he also makes off with more than 2 kilos of silver and a half kilo bar of gold which he buries beneath his tent so he is well aware that he is disobeying the Lord's solemn command. And it mattered. How it mattered, for as we read, it was not only Achan's sin, it was *Israel's* sin and *Israel's* violation of the covenant with God. "That's why the Israelites could not stand against their enemies" (v.12)

We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, the Bible tells us (Rom.3:23) and that's why there is so much wrong with the world, but that does not have to be the end of the story. The Bible also tells us that "the Lord takes no pleasure in the death of the sinner but rather that they turn from their ways and live." (Ezek.33:11)

It is painful to watch Joshua's reaction to the defeat at Ai. He tears his clothes and falls face down before the Lord, and the elders of Israel join him in sprinkling dust over their heads as a sign of mourning over what has happened. The problem is that they are expressing regret not repentance. They may be bemoaning the fact that God's honour has been besmirched but are not acknowledging the fact that their self-confidence and their prayerlessness were just as much a part of the problem as Achan's covetousness and stealing. All Israel had sinned.

And as we each step out into a new week as individuals and as we seek to move forward as a church I want us to learn and take to heart the vital lessons of this morning's passage. No matter how grateful we are for God's goodness to us in the harvest and in our past, we need to trust the Lord in every single step forward that we are yet to take. My friends, none of us has cause for self-

confidence – we need to put our faith in Christ alone. No matter how prayerful we may have been in the past, it is *today's* dependence on God in prayer (or our prayerlessness) that will determine our success (or otherwise) going forward. And it's not about the speck we can see in the eye of someone else in the congregation who may be letting the side down; it's about the plank we have completely missed in our *own* eye. For the sake of the whole body of Christ it is important what each and every one of us does and does not do. Regret for our shortcomings is not enough. What is required is repentance and a willingness to amend our lives and walk with God for that is the way to victory.

Let me close with the precious words that the apostle John wrote: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8,9)

When we get it wrong (as we surely all do) do we simply have regrets or are we ready to repent? Are we going forward in our own strength or in prayer? Is our confidence in ourselves or in God?

Prayer

Based on the prayer of the prophet Daniel as many centuries after Joshua he pleads with God on behalf of the people:

'Now, Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong. Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from your people. Our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors have made your people an object of scorn to all those around us.

'Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, Lord, look with favour on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.' (Daniel 9:13-19)