

SERMON – 13/10/24
'Deception'

“The Israelites sampled [the Gibeonites'] provisions but did not enquire of the Lord. Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live, and the leaders of the assembly ratified it by oath.” (Joshua 9:14,15)

“What is truth?” Pontius Pilate famously asked during the trial of Jesus of Nazareth. It's a question that has occupied a great many people down through the ages, and justifiably so because I imagine most of us believe that it is important to stand up for what is true and that everybody suffers when truth is brushed aside. In an age where people speak about 'my truth' and 'your truth' in an apparent desire to promote tolerance, it can actually be a very small step from apparent tolerance to total anarchy when anything goes and there are no objective standards of right and wrong any more and where 'my truth' and 'your truth' shut down all avenues of debate between political opponents and all conversations between opposing sides in situations of conflict, whether on the global stage or when individuals fall out and have entirely contradictory accounts of what has led them to a point where they cannot be reconciled.

In most societies there is some mechanism to take disputes or different accounts of what has happened to independent mediation or to a court where an individual or a body will sit in judgement on the matter. It's significant in that context, I think, that one of the most serious crimes that can be committed is perjury or contempt of court, because it is recognised that without the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth you are never going to be able to sort out the mess. In most societies there is a mechanism to emphasise the importance of telling the truth and in our country those taking part in court proceedings are asked either to take an oath or to make an affirmation that what they will say will be true.

Some Christians, myself included, believe that taking an oath in court (or anywhere in fact) actually runs counter to the teaching of Jesus that *everything* we say should be the truth, the whole

truth and nothing but the truth and that we should be known as people who when we say 'Yes' or 'No' (or anything else) we mean precisely what we say. Although I respect those who take a different view, when I have given evidence in court or served on a jury I have taken the option to make an affirmation rather than take an oath. A small point perhaps, although I suspect that most people do not realise that by swearing an oath with their hand on the Bible they are by so doing inviting God (with whom they may have little or no relationship) to punish them if they do not tell the truth on the witness stand. At the inauguration of a certain US President a few years ago, it was notable that the said individual opted to swear his oath not on one Bible but two – the official one and one that had belonged to his late mother. I'm not sure whether that was meant to be a double affirmation of the truth he was speaking or an openness to a double portion of divine justice if he should transgress.

Anyway, before we get too sidetracked, the reason I introduce the subject of telling the truth and taking an oath is that it takes us to the very heart of the story we have read this morning from Joshua chapter 9.

I'm very conscious that some of this book is really hard to read (particularly since right now many of the same places that are mentioned here are again in the midst of an unspeakably violent conflict in our time) but I want to reiterate what I have said previously, that the Book of Joshua is descriptive of what happened more than 3000 years ago rather than prescriptive of any behaviour expected of God's people today. And we can't just rip these pages out of our Bibles or leave them unread because they offer us really important lessons and principles in the spiritual realm as we seek God's eternal Kingdom today, so I invite you very consciously to put your New Testament spectacles or headphones on as we listen for God's Word to us this morning from the Book of Joshua in the context of the spiritual battle each one of us is caught up in as we stand up and speak out for the truth.

We have followed the people of God on their roller-coaster journey of faith from the crossing of the River Jordan, humbling themselves before the Lord and seeing Jericho fall, pressing on

then in their own strength and being humiliated as a result at Ai, seeing the consequences of their sin and being assured again of God's remedy for that sin, and trusting the Lord for ultimate victory at Ai. Now the temperature is raised significantly as the peoples further west unite to resist them – the sing-song list of Hittites and Amorites, Canaanites and Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. How will the Israelites prepare to do battle with them?

And how do you and I prepare ourselves spiritually when we are up against it? The apostle Paul teaches the Ephesians that in Christ our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against all kinds of spiritual forces seen and unseen (Eph.6:12).

Both physically and spiritually there are two kinds of opposition: there's the full-on frontal assault (on the battlefield, that would be the huge army lined up against you armed to the teeth and very obviously intimidating) but there's also the much more dangerous enemy, the sixth columnist or the infiltrator, the Trojan horse appearing to be a peace offering but which is a piece of trickery and turns out to be your downfall. Paul teaches the Ephesians about the full armour of God, which significantly begins with 'the belt of truth buckled round your waist' (Eph.6:14) – who would have thought that the belt was the prime piece of armour and yet without it everything else would fall apart.

Anyway, as the Israelites contemplate the prospect of a full-scale pitched battle with the hordes of Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, a bedraggled group of travellers arrive at the Israelite camp at Gilgal. They tell their tale of being people from a far-off land who have heard of the fame of the Lord God of Israel and who have travelled for many, many days to make a treaty with them. In fact, these were people from Gibeon one of the Hivite cities only about 30 miles away from Gilgal. What they have done is, of course, strategically extremely clever and you can't blame the Gibeonites for trying to find a way to save their own skins from the very real threat of annihilation at the hands of the Israelites. But from the point of view of the people of God this was actually a back-door assault based on deception and untruth, an assault that they were completely unprepared for.

As we read, the Israelites 'sampled the Gibeonites' provisions' (v.14) testing out their story that they had been travelling so long that the bread that was still warm when they left home was now thoroughly mouldy and their wine-skins which they said were brand new when they started out on their journey were now all dry and cracked. The Israelites put the Gibeonites' story to a cursory test but of course despite the apparent evidence there was fundamentally no truth in it and they fell for it hook, line and sinker. In what is probably the key verse of this whole chapter, we are told that the Israelites 'did not enquire of the Lord' (v.14) – in other words they didn't pray about it – and on the basis of their half-hearted attempt at verifying the tale, Joshua entered into a treaty with Gibeon and the leaders ratified it with a solemn and binding oath. The consequences are immense – we'll see one of them in the next chapter and you can read about another one several hundred years later when Saul is King in 2 Samuel 21.

Now, whether you like it or not, and whether you even realise it or not, if you are a follower of Jesus, you are in the thick of a spiritual battle. If Satan was to present himself at the front of the church as a bright red horned figure with a trident in his hand and call you to follow him out into the coming week to live a life of violence or debauchery and to cause hurt and distress wherever you go, I hope and expect that you would dismiss him with a cry of 'Get behind me, Satan'. But what if someone like Alan Reid or Alex Johnson or one of the elders was to stand here and present a convincing argument for the whole congregation to head out and do something slightly dodgy because it would work out for the greater good? Would you just agree, or would you get together with others to pray about it. Remember, it was to Peter the apostle that Jesus said those words, 'Get behind me, Satan'. Someone in the congregation got an email this very week purporting to be from me asking them to part with some money to buy gift cards. It might have sounded very plausible, but it wasn't true. It might have had my name on it but it wasn't from me. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, 'Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light' (2 Cor.11:14). We need to have our wits about us and not just to verify the truth of something at a human level but to do what Israel failed to do and to 'enquire of the Lord.'

The question 'What is truth?' remains a crucial one in our time, not just as another US Presidential election draws near, or as different accounts are given by different sides of what is happening in Israel and Palestine and Lebanon, or in Russia and Ukraine, but also as you and I go about our daily business and engage in conversation with those around us. As followers of Jesus who said, 'Let your Yes be Yes and your No be No,' may we be known as those whose word can be utterly relied upon and who stand up and speak out for the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And may we put on the full armour of God, standing our ground against all the assaults of the Evil One whom Jesus calls 'a liar and the father of lies' (John 8:44) who threatens to deceive us and defeat us, and unlike Joshua who 'did not enquire of the Lord' may we do as Paul exhorts the Ephesians 'pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.' (Eph.6:18)