

19th November 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Smith

Hymns: **490** **“Great God your love has called us here”**
 513 **“Take this moment”**
 712 **“Put peace into each others’ hands”**
 503 **“Love divine, all loves excelling”**

Readings: **Judges 4:1-10**
 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
 Matthew 25:14-30

PRAYER

Holy God, break your word among us for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength, and our Redeemer.
Amen.

“DEBORAH, PROPHET FOR OUR TIMES”

Friends last week I told you I would be looking at the story of Deborah the Prophetess today, reflecting on some of the issues about sexist cultures, harassment and gender that have been much in our news these past weeks. This morning on the BBC, I hear that ACAS has issued new guidelines about what sexual harassment is, and is not, and how institutions should deal with it – a spectrum of behaviours and expectations ranging from the inappropriate to the illegal.

Fear not, we shall be light-hearted and light-footed, come with me in these few minutes, where angels fear to tread!

I talk about these things in the spirit of Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians – today we are going to live it out – to encourage one another, and build each other up – we have to think about these things not clothed in our rights, nor statues, nor even in holy anger – we do this reflection with faith and hope as our clothing, with love for our helmet. No thick skins, no self-righteousness, only the confidence and humility of those loved by God.

But we need to talk about it, because in Martin Luther King, Jr’s words, ‘...church should not just to be a thermometer to measure the temperature of a culture, but a thermostat to change it.’ We need to be in this conversation which is going on, as church, with good news.

So let’s be clear, when it comes to challenging cultures of sexual harassment, and the more subtle small patterns of sexual comment or gender bias that blight the development of both our little girls and boys, we are not about just finding more scapegoats – how convenient to put up a few representative figures who have done

evil, and then wipe our consciences clean by tearing them down. It is not about calling other people out without having to consider how we use power ourselves.

Nor are we talking just about equality of men and women in high priced offices and church pulpits. This is about patterns of safety and security of women and men in hourly pay, on zero hour contracts, struggling to reapply for universal credit in the month with five weeks – and not just in this country, but in places where women's equality begins with sinking a borehole so someone is safe to get water.

Here is good news: We have resources in our scripture, in our tradition to help us keep the richness and reality of our working relationships as men and women, and have safety, security for all of us.

So, let's start with Deborah. Deborah is not a perfect person, in politically correct measures of gender politics: but she was an able politician, and she chose to 'play along to get along' without giving in, to the gender expectations of her day.

Her general Barack thought she was sending him on a suicide mission – he wasn't going to go - so he said 'I'll do it, if you go with me' – she came back with ironic wit – using the mores of their culture, which absolutely valued men more than women, against him. 'I'll be with you in the battle victory, but the glory that comes to you won't be so much – they'll say he had to be propped up by a mere woman.' Wit is such a powerful tool, and used all through our scripture – with a twinkle in my eye, I like to imagine the hand gesture or tone of voice Deborah might have used as she called Barack out!

Every day, we face the question of how much to play along, to get along – to tolerate enough of an unthinking sexist, or racist, or homophobic culture to be able to survive in it – we call this 'choosing our battles.' And sadly, it is all too easy and typical for members of an oppressed group to fall out with one another over the issue of which battles to let go – and then spend energy fighting each other versus fighting the culture.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, nineteenth century American Suffragette, was sacked as president of the organisation she herself had founded when she wanted to expand their mission beyond getting the vote by making a wider attack on inequality in the culture. Specifically, she had written something called the 'Women's Bible' – a commentary on scripture from the perspective of women's equality, and had attacked the churches.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton LOVED Deborah – of her, she wrote, '...Genius knows no sex; and woman must again usurp her Divine prerogative as a leader in thought, song, and action. ...Let our church women turn their gaze to such characters as Deborah, and claim the same recognition in their different congregations.'

Interesting, for any of us male and female to think of ourselves as a leader in thought, song, and action – seems very Methodist to me.

But the younger women in her organisation were horrified – you will alienate our moderate members – let's focus on one battle at a time, and play along with the rest a while longer.

We live in the real world, and we know the cost of resisting the small patterns of culture in this way. All well and good to be an idealist like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, but challenge and see how fast in a workplace or school or church, you get a reputation as 'that bolshie woman,' or another word I don't usually say in church.

I think I remember our Prime Minister trying to claim the title 'difficult woman' as a badge of honour. I understand why, and I'm not sure it has worked for her.

But stop laughing at jokes, or point out a pattern of inappropriate sexual innuendo and ask for it to stop, and see how quickly we are cast into outer darkness.

Here we turn to the parable of the Talents – because Jesus as ever has Good News - he knew what the world was like and still helps us live in it as loving, faithful and hopeful people – not twisted, nor cynical – these things are our downfall.

I grew up as a little girl thinking that the landowner in the parable was God – the message to me was clear, work hard to multiply what you are given, and you better see results, Because otherwise – well. We heard where you end up – with less than nothing, and literally nowhere.

But friends, this is a parable, not an allegory. Jesus was speaking to his disciples in a series of wisdom stories, about the world as it is now, in its present inequity before his return. I recognise this world - where you have to play along to get along because the powers that be are hard and unforgiving – do like everyone else and keep your head down, because the master is a harsh, and unforgiving man?

But if we tip the parable over and listen carefully to Jesus, then we get a picture of him not condemning that third servant, but commiserating with us – with the ones caught in that choice – do I play along with a tyrant and try to do as much good as I can in an imperfect world, or do I resist and get nowhere?

Jesus is not talking about gender here at all, let's be clear – but I think there's a point that's apt:

Anyone who has ever stood up to a sexist joke, has said no I won't smile when you ask me to, no I am not going to wear high heels because you say they brighten up the office – anyone who has ever not played along, but challenged, knows what being cast into utter darkness feels like.

Deborah our prophetess, in these terms, was the best example of a wise and faithful, the first servant – she worked in the real world and multiplied her Talents, if you will. She used the gender bias of her day to get her general to do what she wanted – and so doing she was in a position to save her people! By the end of the chapter she would lead them to a great victory, breaking 20 years of slavery and oppression. This surely was good news, progress! She led, as a woman, in an imperfect world?

As I said, I'm not sure she is a model of gender politics, because I don't want her to have to capitulate to the bias of her day to get her basic job done. And I think Jesus means nothing if he doesn't mean this world can change. And we can change it specifically because he is a different kind of master – not harsh, not fault finding, but loving, blessing even our smallest steps!

We have space in our culture for all different sorts of men and women – beautiful in our complexity and diversity – not threatened by one another, but free! We have role models and mentors and can be role models and mentors, we can learn to share – not just our toys but our power. We can do this because God is loving us out of our powerhouses and through the vulnerability of risk, and into a new world. We can trust God who is trustworthy!

I was brought up from a child in Sunday School to revere Deborah – a woman of wisdom whose wisdom was recognised by her people. And her trust in God, her humour, her quick wit and political savvy positively leap off the page. I claim her as a prophet for our time, even if I want to take the next step into a different kind of world for men and women.

So what are we to do, we who have the daily choice to play along and get along, or to stand up and say 'no that joke is not funny,' or 'no do not treat me that way,' or to call out a colleague who has criticised a woman for being too strident or too direct, where she would expect that of a man. What are we to do?

In his notes on the new testament, John Wesley wrote about the last servant, that one who buried his money: "So mere harmlessness, on which many build their hope of salvation, was the cause of his damnation!"

Mere harmlessness. Though he was reading the parable in the traditional way with God as the landowner, I agree with John Wesley that mere harmlessness is not enough. John Wesley surely taught us that there are times when we must rock the boat, when we must call out and break ranks with public opinion of our day, on behalf of those who are still excluded from power. He did, and here we are – and we are an utterly miraculous gathering of people!

It can be so easy to turn away from things that we should challenge, in the name of not wanting to rock the boat. We must not.

No woman, nor man should have sex used as a tool of power over them. Should have to 'give us a kiss,' to get the shift they want, or the break they need. None should have to flirt to get ahead. None should be assumed to be sexually available to those in power over her, or him.

We are called to something more than 'mere harmlessness' John Wesley is absolutely right. We are called, as we have power, to stand with those who do not, and in humility to examine our own practices and beliefs and habits, to let God move them into a new place out of the traps of our inherited cultures, into the grace of the Gospel.

Friends, again listen to Paul in Thessalonians— we are protected not by getting a thick skin, nor by being nasty and tearing others down – but by putting on faith, love, hope.

So friends hear that good word and good news, as we navigate our way in this difficult world of gender politics, gossip and possibility: encourage one another, build one another up – stand against gender stereotypes and sexist cultures, prejudice of all kinds - Have confidence, each day as we make the hard choices about how to get along, and stand with someone who has less power and has been treated poorly: use your power well.

Because here is good news – among us now are prophets and prophetesses. I'm looking out at a church full of Deborahs. Men and women. Some use wit, some knowledge – some song, some action, some of you just sheer graft. All of us are defended by our faith, our love,

our hope – we are made for light, not for the time of wrath but for God's great future.

I give the last words back to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, writing again about Deborah the Prophetess –

'...The antagonism which the Christian church has built up between the male and the female must entirely vanish. Together they will slay the enemies--ignorance, superstition and cruelty. United in every enterprise, they will win; like Deborah and Barak, they will clear the highways and restore peace and prosperity to their people.'

In the name of Christ, may it be so.

Amen.