

Sermon
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West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Judges 6:1-23

Has it ever happened to you that you read a story or watched a film during which you could really relate to one of the characters? Even if the setting was somewhere you have never been – like outer space; or the story was written a *long* time ago – long before you even existed; but on some level you feel as if this character could just as well have been you, so shockingly familiar his/her personality, attitude or expectations are to yours?

It happens... If there is one character in the Bible I think most of us can relate to on some level, it's Gideon – regardless of the fact that he lived a long time ago in completely different circumstances from our own.

So let's take a look at his story:

The stories we read in the book Judges took place in the years 1200-1000 BC. In this book there is a clear pattern visible in the behaviour of the Israelites (the people of God): They wander away from God, start worshipping idols, then God punishes them by allowing a Gentile nation to overthrow them, then they come to their senses and ask God for help, and then God saves them – and he does this by means of sending

someone, called a “judge” (hence the name of the book, “Judges”). Then, for a wee while, things are peaceful and everybody is happy, until the same pattern repeats itself all over again.

The story of Gideon is no exception.

We read that the Israelites did wrong in the eyes of God, so God gave them over in the hands of the Midianites for 7 years. The Midianites were nomads, and they were well known for attacking settled people in harvest time and claiming all the crops for themselves.

Things were so bad that the Israelites knew that only God would be able to rescue them. So when they pleaded for forgiveness, God once again felt sorry for them and decided to send them someone to free them from Midianite oppression – and this someone was Gideon.

The fact that God chose Gideon for this difficult and important task, makes you think that Gideon must have been someone really special, doesn't it? Somebody with a strong character, leadership skills and most probably some status in the community, and of course – a very strong faith. A “mighty warrior”.

But where did the angel of God find this “mighty warrior”? Threshing wheat in a winepress (hidden away from public view) – not on the open planes where it was usually done. Why? Because he was scared. He was hiding from the Midianites.

All that makes the angel's remark: "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior", sound a little ironic, doesn't it? Because by the looks of it, Gideon was *anything* but a mighty warrior!

And to make it worse, Gideon didn't realise straight away that this *stranger* visiting him was an angel of God. So he jumped on his high horse and said: "But sir...if the Lord is with is, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about..?"

It is very clear from Gideon's reaction that because he couldn't see that God was in control, he also didn't *believe* it. And that it never even occurred to him that they were in that messy situation because of their own doing, not because God has forgotten about them...

To which the angel replied that *that* was exactly why he was there – to summon Gideon to go change all this.

But *that* Gideon couldn't believe. He said: "How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." Gideon thought: "Surely God wouldn't choose *me* to do such an important job! There would be many others better suited for this very important job than *me!*"

The angel *assured* Gideon that God would be with him, but still he was hesitant. So he asked for a sign. And then, when God did what he asked, when God *gave* him a sign, he got the fright of his life and felt really silly for not realising straight away that he was talking to an angel of God.

And although this realisation changed things for Gideon, although it made him believe that God actually wanted him to do this job and that God would be with him all the way, Gideon stayed Gideon. He started obeying God's orders slowly and hesitantly, and asked for sign after sign, and although initially the Israelites didn't trust Gideon all that much, Gideon gained more confidence in the fact that God was with him and before long he had a huge army together to fight the Midianites: 3200 men to be precise.

Gideon was really pleased that so many men responded to his call. But then, once again, God did something that surprised him. God told Gideon to send every single man home who had doubt in his heart about fighting this battle. So many left. But still God wasn't satisfied. So he told Gideon to test them and send even more soldiers home, until there were only 300 men left.

Why did God do this? Because He didn't want the Israelites to think that when they win this war, they did it all by themselves...

Gideon told the people to do exactly what God told him, and in the end, without even having to lift a sword, God gave his people victory.

Gideon couldn't believe it – something he would never have been able to imagine even in his wildest dreams, happened to him. God used *him* – an ordinary, average guy – to change the history of his people. Absolutely amazing.

But then, sadly, as time passed, history repeated itself again. The people wanted to make Gideon their new king, but he insisted that God

was their only king. And for a wee while things went smoothly and people tried to live in relation to God. But as they got absorbed in their ordinary lives again, gradually people started forgetting about God and started worshipping idols once more...

It's almost frustrating reading these stories in the book of Judges – it makes you want to shout: didn't you learn your lesson the 1st time people? Don't go down that same road again!! But it's too late for them now.

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It's not too late for *us* though!

Could you relate to some of the things that happened in this story?

Don't we also sometimes feel as if God has forgotten about us when we go through difficult times? And then, before long, we focus so much on the bad and negative things in our lives, that we don't even notice the good things anymore? And least of all the presence of God in our lives?

And then – if things change? If our circumstances change for the better, do we give God the recognition he deserves, do we stand still for a minute and make a conscious decision to always see God in our lives, or do we get so used to the 'good life' and taken up in the business of every day living so quickly again, that we then also forget about God and start worshipping our own wee idols?

And let's talk about Gideon. He was just an ordinary guy, someone like you and me... Someone with fears and preconceived ideas, not really

'hero material', shall we say? But God wanted to use him, and God did. God said that he would be with him, and he was.

All of us are ordinary people too – just going about with our daily lives, just trying to make the best of our situations, keeping ourselves busy with the things we have to do. Not necessarily hero-material...

But then one day there's a knock on your door and your neighbour's locked his keys in his car, or you see a friend's not coping with the little sleep she gets with a baby in the house, or you overhear a conversation about volunteers needed to run a church project?

Do you think that things like these happen by chance? Or do you think that maybe, just maybe, God wanted you to be there at that time so you could phone your neighbour's insurance company or give him a lift somewhere, watch your friend's baby for an afternoon so she can take a nap, or volunteer to help where help is needed in the church?

I can stand here and give examples 'till next year this time. The bottom line is: if God gives you a job to do, whether this is a wee job or a big job – how do you react?

Do you say yes straight away? Or do you first consider the pro's and con's involved for yourself? Are you willing to be an instrument in the hands of God, or are you full of excuses?

God won't ever expect you to do things you can't – he knows you better than anybody else, he made you, after all; and God won't ever leave you alone to get on with it, he'll be with you every step of the way.

And this we know because he proved it to us in Jesus Christ. In Jesus God broke the vicious cycle of *people sinning, then suffering, then begging for forgiveness, and only then being rescued by God*. In Jesus he forgave us, once and for all.

And that should be such a big thing for us that it changes us forever. We should always be in awe of the fact that God doesn't hold our transgressions against us. We should never just carry on with our lives as if nothing exceptional has happened.

Because God chose *us* to change history. He chose *us* to go tell the rest of the world about his love, he chose *us* to be his mouth and hands and feet here on earth.

So let's 'man' up and do this as best we can, because if God wants you to do something, you *don't* ignore him.

God used Gideon, despite his shortcomings and fears. God wants to use us too, despite *our* shortcomings and fears. And just like he was with Gideon, he'll be with us too.

Gideon didn't conquer the Midianites because *he* was good; he conquered the Midianites because *God* was good.

So go home today, and remember: The Lord is with you, mighty warrior! Be quick to recognise him, be eager to listen to him, and be excited to be obedient to him, because with Him on our side, no battle will ever be lost.

Amen