

St Andrew's on the Terrace Sunday 19 May 2019 Deborah – judge of Israel

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

Judges 4

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, now that Ehud was dead. So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.

Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading[a] Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."

"Certainly I will go with you," said Deborah. "But because of the course you are taking, the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him. Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaananim near Kedesh. When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera summoned from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron. Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him. At Barak's advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot. Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, and all Sisera's troops fell by the sword; not a man was left. Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite. Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. "I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up. "Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone in there?' say 'No.'" But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.

On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. 24 And the hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him.

Responsive Contemporary reading

'A Psalm for the Gift of Counsel'

from *WomanWisdom* by Miriam Therese Winter

All: *in dark italics*, Left hand side: *in italics*, Right hand side: in plain font

We celebrate the witness of women, Women who gave good counsel, Women who give good counsel
In public life, institutional life, in politics, academia, medicine religion and corporate industry

We pray for the gift of counsel To be given to ourselves

We give praise for the witness of women today and throughout the ages.

We sing of Deborah and all other women who gave and give good counsel;
Women judges and women on juries, Women lawyers and women employers,
Women in parliament, mayors, and all civic leaders today;
 Women who are socially responsible, *Women who are corporately responsible;*
 Women scholars, instructors, coaches, *advisors, and all who are engaged in research;*
 Women bishops, preachers, priests, teachers, *Ministers, counsellors and caregivers;*
 Women physicians, musicians, analysts, panellists *Journalists and media people;*
 Women executives, administrators, *producers, directors, inspectors and supervisory personnel;*
 May all in the public sector be blessed with the gift of counsel
May we too give good counsel in the role of our public lives.
So may it be AMEN

Reflection for the Gathering

Deborah is a little-known woman of the Hebrew Bible and yet, by the few criteria we have to apply, was obviously a legend in her time.

In today's story from the Hebrew Bible, Deborah warns Barak that if she comes along on the raiding party, the honour for any victory will go to a woman rather than a man. And so it was. Research has shown that boys even as young as primary school age get easily bored with the main characters of stories are female.

So it is first surprising that this story survived and that Deborah and Jael are named in the writings of a patriarchal society. Secondly, in a patriarchal Christian church, it is not surprising that this story is seldom given an airing with its twin female heroes.

Deborah stands out because she is named.
 She stands out as the only female judge named in the Hebrew Bible.
 She stands out because she also shows prowess as a military leader.
 She stands out because she is wise.
 She stands out because the people know this and value it.

Into what part of Jewish history did Deborah fit?

Joshua took over from Moses and was the one who actually led the people into Canaan. From the time of his death to the anointing of Israel's first King, King Saul, a period of about 300 years, the nation was governed by judges. They did not rule the whole 12 tribes, like a king or emperor, but were wise leaders who settled disputes and gave rulings. People took their disagreements and troubles to the judges who sometimes sat at the city gates or, in Deborah's case under a palm tree. Deborah's dates are given as 1204-1144 BCE – a long before Christ as the medieval Gothic cathedrals were after Christ.

In this snippet from her life, Deborah acts as a prophet, conveying to Barak from the tribe of Naphtali, what she names as the word of the Lord – that after 20 years of oppression by the Canaanites, there was now an opportunity to defeat Sisera, commander of the Canaanite troops under King Jabin.

While Barak's tally of ten thousand fighters seems impressive compared with Sisera's 900, Sisera was better equipped with iron chariots which offered speed, protection and a tank-like impregnability. A mounted chariot rider had a better view, superior height over foot soldiers and could carry archers. A division of chariots gave an advantage was somewhat like a modern day division of armoured tanks.

The strategy however was clever, Sisera and his chariots were lured into a dry riverbed with steep sides, rendering the range of the chariots useless and his 900 strong army a sitting duck to be finished

off. The river valley was that of the Kishon river. The city of Haifa is situated on the mouth of the Kishon where it meets the Mediterranean. All this action takes place south east of the Sea of Galilee.

So the rout occurred, though the commander, Sisera escapes and takes shelter in a blacksmith's tent – a blacksmith who had been doing some work for Sisera's king. There was no reason for Sisera to feel at all unsafe, hiding in an ally's tent.

Jael, the blacksmith Heber's wife, however, could see which way fortunes were running. King Jabin and his commander Sisera were routed, and after 20 years of oppression by the Canaanites the Israelites might not be disposed to be too kindly towards allies of the defeated side. However, if one could offer them the dead body of the enemy commander, that would be a prize for which one might be rewarded! It might also save a defenceless enemy ally woman from rape or death.

So the wife of the blacksmith, Jael, comes out to meet Sisera and warmly invites him in "Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid."

He enters and she offers him rest. He asks for water, and she gives him milk. He asks her to keep his presence confidential.

The mighty man stripped of his iron chariots is exhausted and soon sleeps. And we heard read (and this is where the health warning needs to be given – the contents of this story may cause distress.) "But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died."

The word 'temple' is a mis-translation. The tent peg probably was hammered through the back of Sisera's mouth severing his spinal cord to kill him. Just saying!

Just in time, too. Barak is on Sisera's tail and a relieved Jael presents him with his quarry – already dead. Jael is not now seen as an enemy ally sheltering a prize fugitive, but as a warrior on the right side, helping to win the battle.

These two women are not acting out traditional female roles in their own time and their actions even in 2019 are still unusual – not unknown, but unusual.

If we were to apply an uncritical feminist reading of this narrative we would be uncomplicatedly be celebrating these women's courage, skill, military and strategical prowess. Like the way Ruth's support of Naomi is praised and Ruth named as being better than seven sons, these women would be praised as doing the work of seven men – (the significance of the word seven being that it was a special number with more importance than its actual numerical value.)

Deborah's strategizing leaves her responsible but without actual blood on her hands. Jael however has done the final deed herself. She has also broken several Geneva conventions. She has killed an unarmed man who was exhausted and unconscious at the time. On the other hand, as a female of the time, she was at every disadvantage, just as women still are in the battlefields of today. She had only the weapon which was to her hand – a tent peg and mallet. She knew herself to be imminently at the mercy of a tribe seeking revenge for 20 years of ill treatment. She knew they would not be inclined to show much mercy to enemies and allies of enemies whether they be defenceless and female or not.

Today we consider this story within the setting of a nuclear free peace church, where the poppies are white, not red and the attitude to war is very different from that in the times of inter tribal warfare between Canaanite and Israelite.

Do we uncomplicatedly celebrate women taking on roles formerly held by men if any and all the evils of those roles are perpetuated without alteration or transformation?

The early days of women entering business included power dressing, sharp business suits and an uneasy blend of macho and feminine behavioural patterns. There were strategies one had to use to be noticed by 'the boys', there were networks into which women were not admitted. There was the

attitude that if women were assertive, they were seen as strident while an assertive man was approved as manly and strong. I remember making contributions in a brainstorm which were consistently ignored by the male leader but accepted when a man in the group later made the same suggestion. Women like myself and my foremothers can hardly believe that not only do we have a third female prime minister, but Australia likes her too! It might not have been a surprise to find that in yesterday's elections, Australians struck out the official candidates for prime minister and wrote in Jacinda! It is interesting to see that somehow this female prime minister has been able to integrate strength and compassion, empathy and effective use of power to achieve change.

We know that for too long we have divided human behaviour into two artificial camps. The word 'feminine' has suggested 'sugar and spice and all things nice', whereas 'masculine' isn't actually about puppy dog tails but about all things macho, strong and dominant. Both are a wrong caricature of the depth and complexity which femininity and masculinity can offer all genders.

I have noticed this a lot as a female minister who is still the minority in a church with mostly male clerical leadership. Also as a female academic when it was still not as common for women to do doctorates in theological areas. I studied how to present, what questions to ask, even where to sit at a workgroup table to be seen and heard. Leadership which was not authoritarian and 'strong' was not recognised. Even when women came into power, they did not always remember where they had come from and that in front of them was a variety of people. I personally sometimes wonder if I studied the male way of being a leader and lost something along the way. Then I act as a leader in what I think is a feminine way and find what I say is not heard or acted on. This leads me to ruminate on the fact that things are changing only very, very slowly.

It is good to see in younger generations a greater confidence in younger women and a greater depth and gentleness in younger men. It is good to hear when CEOs resign to spend more time with their family. You only hope that it is not because there are already problems in their family due to an over busy absentee father or a workaholic mother because to some extent a whole generation has been sucked into a worshipping of power and influence which is frequently unhealthy.

Today's ancient story, three millennia old, tells us that so-called 'masculine' qualities can be shown by women too. As I look around me in 2019, I see that slowly men are picking up the so-called feminine qualities as they nurture their children. The gender-fluid lobby, on the rise at the moment is prodding us to think about this in new ways, calling into question our baby boomer and quiet loyal generation's division into what is right for women and what is right for men. Despite the changes since the 1960s, we still find old attitudes lurk underneath our veneer of civilization. Human behaviour is a palette with a range of colours. We all need the freedom to choose widely from them all, whatever gender we may be or whatever fluidity of gender we may prefer. If we choose only one set of colours, the canvas of our lives will be dull and monochromatic, grey and boring. Only with the full range at our disposal will we be able to live full and happy and colourful lives.

Given their situation and their times, I admire Deborah and Jael for entering the military domain. We do not know what we would do, put into the same situations as they found themselves in and the same situations in which many women and men find themselves in the Middle East, Mexico, Gaza, the Sudan and Yemen. At the same time both women and men need to be working to ensure that all warfare ends, that men and women both learn the skill of having difficult conversations firmly but peaceably, that we all learn to communicate openly and honestly with the courage of Jael and the wisdom of Deborah

Then no one of any gender needs to go to war anymore and no one of any gender needs become a victim of war anymore but all will have the wisdom to live in peace.

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