11th May 2014

Judges 4

This week the British Government revealed it is considering allowing women to fight alongside men in frontline combat?

Unlike armed forces in many other countries including the US, the British Army does not currently allow it, but the defence secretary wants to send a signal that the military is open to "all" who meet its standards.

Some female soldiers gave their views on the issue on Newsnight on BBC 2 Thursday evening. [[1]](#endnote-1) **Naomi Borrows**, said "It's pretty much down to a woman that we are not speaking Latin today," she said, referring to Queen Boudicca, who led a major uprising against Roman forces almost 2,000 years ago. She saw no reason why women should not serve in close-combat roles if they were "physically capable". **Major Judith Webb**, said women were "different physiologically". She said the lack of any impetus to get women playing in men's rugby teams demonstrated why women should not be sent into close combat.

Well it’s an interesting debate and by a coincidence our scripture passage this morning is the story of two women warriors. Stories of women are rare in the male dominated and male written Bible. But when they do appear they are usually interesting and the type of women you don’t want to mess with.

If you are looking for a passage in the Bible that will make women and girls feel powerful then this is it! This is Girl Power. So let’s look at our story of Deborah and Jael: women warriors and reflect on what this ancient story can say to us today.

A bit of context: as you know we are on a three year journey through the Bible. We started in Genesis and have now got to the book of Judges. In alternative months we have been looking at themes from the New Testament. A couple of months ago we looked at the book of Joshua, the preceding story before Judges. Joshua was all about the Israelites, having escaped slavery in Egypt by Moses and having wandered in the wilderness for forty years, now finally entering into the Promised Land and kicking out the present occupiers. Judges is the story of how the Israelites start to settle in the land and still have skirmishes with the surrounding residents. The Israelites are tempted to compromise their faith and take on the beliefs and practices of those around them. This leads to national decline and apostasy, God then punishes them by raising up enemy armies to oppress them; the people cry out to God for deliverance; God raises up a deliverer, or a Judge, and the people come back to God and prosperity returns. So the book of Judges goes on in this cycle.

So we pick it up in chapter four.

‘*After Ehuds death...the Israelites once again did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord and he sold them into the power of Jabin the Canaanite king who ruled in Hazor. The commander of his forces was Sisera. The Israelites cried to the Lord for help….at that time Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, a prophetess, was judge in Israel. It was her custom to sit under the Palm tree and Israelites seeking a judgement went up to her.*’ REB

Deborah is a beautiful name – but there again I am biased. In Hebrew, the language in which the Old Testament was written, it literally means ‘Bee’ and there is a bit of a sting in the tail of Debbie. The irony lies in the description of her as the wife of Lappidoth. It is an odd name and in Hebrew it looks like a feminine word, which gives the impression that in this marriage Deborah is the one who wears the trousers. Deborah’s husband has no further mention in the story, whilst Deborah comes across as self-assured, feisty and even fiery.

Men can have mixed feelings about strong women. Apart from finding someone who was desperate enough to marry me, I was also hoping for a wife who would be capable of standing up to me. I haven’t been disappointed. Twenty years of marriage and I know Debbie’s look and facial expressions that immediately tell me when I’m out of order, and she is invariably right. For anyone, wisdom and maturity do not come effortlessly, but usually as a result of making bad decisions and choices and learning from them. I’m grateful for my wife in helping me to grow up. There is still a long way to go yet.

All relationships are different, personalities are different, likes attract, and different personalities can complement – Aahh the mystery and agony of human relationships. For some there can be no room for another powerful person in the marriage – but somehow it works. For others, equality and co-operation are important. Communication is always vital to know how you work, your roles and expectations. Maybe Deborah in this marriage expected her husband Lappidoth to look after the house and the family while she went about being a judge and prophetess.

Tony Campolo the great American Evangelical Baptist preacher was speaking at Greenbelt last year *about Power and authority. He said power is inversely related to love. Whoever has power in a relationship exercises the least love. For example, take a marriage where a man can come and go. The wife is in love with him and will do anything for him. Who is in control? Who can dictate the terms in the relationship? He has power and control but he has not love. More you love the more vulnerable you become. That’s why the stoic philosophers said don’t love anyone because you will become vulnerable. Jesus became vulnerable as he hung on the cross. Can’t express love without giving up power.*

Campolo said that every time he speaks in family conferences there is always a man who asks the question: who’s supposed to the head of the house.

 I must interject at this point and say that my wife is happy for me to be the head of our household, so long as she is the neck who turns the head!

Campolo said real Christian never ask that question – who is master. Jesus says never ask can I be the master – instead be someone’s servant. In my kingdom those who would be master should be servant. Who’s the head of household? Bible says (Eph 5) women submit to husband. Next verse – husband love wives as Christ loved church and gave himself for it. He loved church by becoming a slave for it – gave himself up for the church. What women would not submit themselves to a man who would be her slave? If she is being submissive and he being a slave who is in charge? Try Jesus. Be in dialogical relationship to discover what Christ wants done in the home.

Campolo said the feminist movement were correct when they said they were fed up with pushy dominating obnoxious men. But they were also right when said the answer to that is not to replace them with pushy, dominating, obnoxious women. Wives and husbands submit to yourselves in love – each esteeming each other in love. ‘My hopes dreams and aspirations – sacrifice so can be everything you want to be’ – but then wife says ‘no I sacrifice myself’. Campolo said that’s the first argument – only argument allowed in scripture. Outdo each other in love! Esteem each other better than yourselves. Marriages are falling apart because too many power games. Too many control freaks. I can’t breathe in this relationship. Jesus set us free. Esteem each other in love.

Who knows how Deborah and Lappidoth’s relationship worked? But what we do know is that Deborah is a fine example of a woman leader in the Bible.

Just last week the Church of England celebrated the 20th anniversary of the ordination of women priests. They are still agonising over whether to make women bishops.

The Congregational denomination, from which the United Reformed Church partly came from, was the first mainline Christian denomination to have women minsters. We judge not on gender but on whether God has called and equipped with his Spirit. This is the new community of Pentecost where there is neither male nor female, salve or free, the old barriers and demarcations have broken down - we are one in the spirit. (Galatians 3)

*Is church leadership male? Jesus was male, his disciples were male – goes the argument. He was also Jewish, and a carpenter – how far do you want to go? Women were treated as second class in Jesus day and he started a revolution in male- female relations. Talking to women at the well, being non dismissive of their presence, appearing to women first after on Easter day – making them the first apostles. Some of the early church leaders were women, people like Lydia and Phoebe and many scholars suggest that some of the later epistles in the new testament were written putting women in their place, don’t talk in assemblies, wear hats, don’t be in leadership, because the early church was scandalizing the surrounding culture who couldn’t handle this radical departure in gender politics.*

Go back to the Old Testament and you get Deborah a leader of the Israelites.

But notice the source of her leadership. She doesn’t try to take charge and she’s not interested in being upfront. The leader of the Israelite army, Barak, has to urge her to go with the army – she is reluctant to take the praise (verse 9, 10. She simply says and does what God tells her and it has a powerful effect. She says to Barak ‘this is what the Lord commands... and goes on to tell him to take the army to Mount Tabor where he will defeat Sisera’s army.

As we saw in the life of Joshua, a spiritual leader is someone who knows the ways of God. The path to Christian leadership is not attaining a prominent position or lording it over a big staff. It’s developing the ability to listen to God. And whether you are a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, you can be that kind of leader. Think about Joel prophecy about how the Spirit of God would be poured out on your sons and daughters, old men will dream dreams and young men will prophesy, the spirit will be poured out on all flesh. (Hoping to have a short conference in October to look at the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the church).

The church desperately needs people who know how to hear and follow God’s direction, and know God’s timing.

How to we listen for God in our lives? How do we know God’s guidance? God’s word? Maybe there are times when we feel that there has been a special message for us. Maybe something has happened when we have sense God’s involvement, it has taken our breath away. It has stopped us in our tracks; it has made us go deeper within ourselves. Reading scripture, words have stood out – as if written for us. God communicates – that is the testimony of the Bible and of people of faith down the ages. Next week, as we look at the story of our next Judge, Gideon, and his fleece, we will ponder the issue of guidance more.

Deborah is a woman who listens for God and then shares what she has discerned. She is not afraid to speak and say ‘this is what I believe the Lord is saying’.

Going back to the story, Barak obeys instructions and goes to Mount Tabor. Sisera’s army comes to attack in their chariots, but as is revealed in Deborah’s song in the next chapter, there is a flood in the plain and the chariots are stuck in the mud and rendered useless, which gives the Israelites the advantage and they rout Sisera’s army.

Sisera flees and finds shelter in Jael’s tent. Jael is the wife of Heber the Kenite, who the writer of Judges tells us, is descended from Moses. Sisera thinks he is safe in Heber’s compound because there is an alliance between Heber’s boss and Sisera's boss. But Jael does not feel bound to give priority to politics over family and she knows how to use her femininity on Sisera. ‘Come in my lord, come into my tent… do not be afraid’. Sisera comes in and falls asleep with exhaustion, presumably from battle (the bible doesn’t say), and while he’s asleep Jael hammers a tent peg through his skull. I bet they didn’t teach her that at the WI.

They say that violent crime is down in our society. Which is good news. Sadly around the world violence is endemic. Usually in a conflict women are vulnerable. In South Sudan, highlighted as an area where Christian Aid are at work, recent civil war has seen villages burnt to the ground and women raped by marauding soldiers. Women are by and large more sinned against than are sinners in a time of war. It is remarkable in that context that the Bible has this story of a woman striking out with vengeance.

But of course it is highly problematical for modern people and followers of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. As I have mentioned before, in discussing the religiously inspired violence in the book of Joshua, the bible legitimates violence as a sign of God’s vengeance, retribution and justice on this earth. But this is held in tension with the way of Jesus, who forgave his crucifiers, and repaid anger and hatred with love and forgiveness. I can give no easy answers.

The outcry and horror of Boko Haram’s kidnapping of innocent schoolchildren in Nigeria is yet another example of religiously motivated violence. The intolerance of those who have different beliefs and values is at the heart of their mission to eradicate non Islamic teaching and practices. The book of Judges likewise has a God-sponsored genocide of those who don’t believe in the God of the Israelites. Atheists love this stuff as evidence that religion is evil. Religious folk then retaliate by mentioning Hitler and Stalin to make the point that you don’t need the excuse of religion for violence you just need a lust for power and an intolerance of anyone who does not agree with you.

The argument will continue. What I can say about Jael is her courage is outstanding. Imagine being a woman and getting this violent merciless warrior in your tent. And then making your point with him!

At the churches together forum on Thursday we had a talk by David Post who is raising money to support Canon Andrew White the vicar of Baghdad. Andrew White is a man of great courage and the Christians in Baghdad have great courage and faith. Before Saddam was deposed there were about 100 Christians worshipping at St Georges Anglican church in the centre of Baghdad. After he was deposed members of the church increased to about 5000. There were stories of miracles and remarkable happenings. Canon White started a free health clinic and food distribution. He is used by the government as a go between in many situations because he is one of the few people that can be trusted. But Al Qaeda sympathisers became alarmed at the growth of the church. They watched the Christians and put letters through their doors saying they would burn down their houses unless they left the church. If that was you – if that was your family – your young children – what would you do? Not surprisingly the church lost 500 families overnight. But still hundreds defy the Islamists. Hundreds have the courage to face down those who would use violence and intimidation because their faith mattes and God gives them the courage. It was a humbling and inspiring story.

Christian Aid, in their worship material for his Christian Aid Week, offer a number of courageous stories of people overcoming fear with hope. You can watch them on their website. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/getinvolved/christianaidweek/collections/index.aspx>

Ever since the peace accord of 2005, around 2 million south Sudanese people living in exile from civil war have begun returning home. The numbers of returnees have intensified since 2011 when South Sudan gained independence and became the world’s youngest nation. Those returning speak of precarious journeys home, fraught with ambushes, looting, violence and rape: stories of fear from people who for all that, have still travelled in hope. But their new home is a fledgling country whose transformation is regularly disrupted by inter-communal violence, rebellion by militia groups and localised conflicts over land and natural resources. Making peace and living in reconciliation remains a critical challenge for these people.

In Apada, South Sudan, returnees were provided with land by the government but little else. One of Christian Aid’s partners in Apada is Hope Agency for Relief and Development (HARD). HARD provided the returnees with hope in the shape of temporary shelters, blankets, water containers, mosquito nets and other essentials. In the longer-term, HARD is providing finance for shelters that will withstand the rains and cash grants to initiate businesses.

One of those who returned was a woman called Teresa. She was supported by HARD to open a church because she knew that it was faith that sustained her hopes in the toughest times. She says: ‘A church is important for a community. When I returned, I opened up this church. It is full of people. We sing, we pray and we support each other. Everybody is welcome.’

It is here, through church and in shared faith, that Christian Aid supporters in the UK hold in common. Here, in worship we share the same scriptures and in solidarity can support one another, believing in hope.

Journalist David Frost once interviewed Archbishop Desmond Tutu addressing him with the words: ‘I always think of you as an optimist.’ To which Desmond replied, ‘I'm not an optimist, I'm a prisoner of hope.’

Optimism is a flimsy feeling upon which to build a transformed life but Christian hope is rooted in the infinite possibilities for transforming hurt into healing and fear into trust that spring forth from the resurrection of Christ.

I know it is hard going collecting for Christian Aid. I will be there too facing the rejections and the closed doors. Some people don’t like cold callers. Some people are so wrapped up in their own lives that they don’t think of others. Some are giving money elsewhere. Some don’t give money – charity begins at home – their home. But some people are generous. Some people do give to Christian Aid. The courage to knock on someone’s door is small in comparison to defy Islamic militants in Baghdad, or armed rebels in Sudan. But the precious money you raise can be used by Christian Aid to bring hope to those who live in fear. It makes an awful difference – don’t lose sight of that.

Like Deborah and Jael, may God help us to listen for his call, follow his ways and display courage, faith and hope in all our actions and situations.

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-27335442> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)