**2nd March 2014**

**Joshua 1**

The other week, on Tuesday 18th February, Hollie Gazzard was working a busy shift in a hair salon, Fringe benefits, on Southgate St, Gloucester when she was stabbed to death, allegedly by her ex-boyfriend. Colleagues screamed as they watched her fall. Paramedics tried but failed to save her life. People passing stared as they always stare when tragedies unfold in front of their eyes. But some of them didn’t just stare. They whipped out their phones and videoed it. The police have urged members of the public not to post those videos on social networking sites such as YouTube.

Christina Patterson[[1]](#endnote-1) writing in last week’s Guardian commented that: ‘*you might think that people would guess that those whose hearts have been broken might not want their daughter’s last moments to become an online hit. But actually it looks as though they didn’t. It looks, for instance, although the people who watched a young solider in Woolwich have his neck hacked into thought the best way to respond was to create a YouTube sensation. ‘Uncensored video of Woolwich Mujahedeen’ has had nearly half a million hits. ‘Raw footage of Woolwich attack’ has also had half a million hits.’*

Patterson comments that it is hardly news that people like a bloody thrill. Romans queued to watch wild animals tear Christians into chunks. Public hangings were always well attended.

But watching someone die has been an opportunity to increase your twitter following or get Facebook likes.

Patterson reflects whether this is a symptom of a de-sensitised society that spends too much time in the virtual world, too much time online, on the internet, on computer games, looking at a TV and not enough contact with reality. She thinks we are increasingly becoming a narcissistic society – we are just in love with ourselves. 80% of social networking is about the self. And if you post a video about a soldier being cut down in the street it could be about the soldier, but it could also not. It could be saying ‘I got there first’. I got the exclusive!

Our ability to empathise with others it is argued, is being diminished. We are getting worse at putting ourselves in others shoes. Whether our digital diet is to blame is still open to debate. Did those who filmed Hollie Gazzard go away and reflect on what they filmed. Were they moved and distressed by what they saw. Or were they just sociopathically removed from any feelings about the death they had just witnessed.

What has all this got to do with the book of Joshua from the Old Testament I hear you say?

Two things.

First of all we need to be sensitive to the issues that looking at the book of Joshua raises. Many preachers will just use the book of Joshua as a metaphor for the spiritual life and of course I will be doing that too. But there is a reality behind it and a historical narrative that raises all sorts of difficult issues.

Basically it tells the story of how the former Hebrew slaves, who have escaped from Egypt under Moses, now enter their promised land. They have been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years and now they find the courage and strength to make the final push. Under Joshua they will colonise and conquer the land of Canaan. Never mind net immigration up by 50,000: this is a takeover. This brings to fulfilment the promise that God gave to Abraham roughly 500 years previously. God promised Abraham (Genesis 12.1-3) that he would be the father of a great people, he would have land, and he would have blessing. People, Property and Prosperity in other words. At the start of the book of Joshua the wrong people are in the right place and are not subject to blessing. The right people are in the wrong place and are not receiving the blessing. The book of Joshua is God’s action to get the right people in the right place in order to receive the right blessing. It is about God trying to get his people back to where they should be.

Of course it is a parallel for the Christian life. Often we feel out of place. We don’t feel right. Our struggle and journey is to be in the right place, to be the right person, and then to receive the consequent blessing. Our Christianity Explored course is trying to help people understand the Christian message that the fundamental issue in life is being right with God, the creator of life, the sustainer of life, the origin and destiny of life. Once you are right in that relationship you have a launch pad to get the other things in your life right and in better shape.

But the book of Joshua is problematic because the means to get the right people in the right place to receive the right blessing involved a lot of bloodshed and divinely sanctioned slaughter and genocide. We cannot be desensitised to that and the questions it asks of our faith. The legacy of this attitude still has repercussions in the Middle East today – the competing claims over land, the centuries of dispute and conflict and claims to be more blessed and favoured by God than other nations. We must not be blind to these issues, as if we are just watching a film on a mobile phone or you tube clip – detached and uninvolved. This is real life.

The second reason why I started with the story of Hollie Gazzard is because it flags up the issue of character – who we are and the danger of what we are becoming. Stand back, film an incident but don’t’ get involved. The conviction of the killers of Corporal Lee Rigby in the Woolwich attacks this week reminded us again how many bystanders just watched this officer attacked and even filmed it – but didn’t have the courage to get involved. Now you could say – health and safety - best to wait for the police to arrive – and the police did arrive. But by then Lee Rigby had had his head severed from his body – it was too late. The courage and character to respond too his killers at the moment of their attack was sadly lacking among those bystanders.

The central character in the book of Joshua is of course Joshua. His character and virtues made him who he was and able to carry out this challenge. In our passage to day God offers four pieces of advice to Joshua to make him the type of leader who will make a difference – who will be successful.

There is a common desire within every person to feel successful. We often measure our worth on the basis of how successful we are. How we measure that success is often based on a worldly standard rather than a godly standard. Success by the world’s standard often means luxury, wealth, and possessions, achievements, notoriety, and fame, beauty, brains and brawn. Go to any airport bookstall you will see many books self-help books on how to be successful and get on. Let’s look at The Book – the Bible and see what it suggests for forming character, godly character and how to be a successful leader.

**Principle 1: BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS**  
There was a man who bragged that he had cut off the tail of a man-eating lion with his pocket knife. Asked why he hadn’t cut off the lion’s head, the man replied: “Someone had already done that.” It’s easy sometimes to be cocky, and pretend to be brave but what Joshua needed was true bravery, and courage.  
Notice the number of times God brings this command before Joshua. (v. 6, 7, 9).

What is courage? Courage has several synonyms: in the REB bible the word ‘resolute’ is used but you could also use bravery, valour, fearlessness, heroism, confidence, nerve. It also has several nicknames: guts, grit, and backbone.  
There’s one very important thing we need to notice about courage. You don’t usually witness courage in someone who is at ease in Zion; someone who is living a comfortable life. Courage is seen in the person whose back is against the wall, when the odds are against them, when the pressure is on, when the flaming arrows are close, when the pain is intense, when the attack is at hand. Courage can only be seen in the midst of conflict and struggle.

Debbie and I have just been in Florence for our 20th wedding anniversary. We stood before the famous statue of David by Michelangelo. It is an imposing 17 foot statue that was unveiled at a time when the Florentines were under siege. It inspired the city to acts of courage and defiance. Unusually for a statue of David it didn’t show him wearing armour with the severed head of Goliath at his feet. Instead you have a naked David – which certainly draws the eye - poised ready to act. Michelangelo emphasises human thought and motivation – David is gazing over his shoulder, stone in hand poised ready to act, balanced between thought and action, head and hands. It is an interesting argument whether courage is something spontaneous – you don’t know how you will react until the moment when you have to respond or is premeditated. Here God is encouraging a conscious preparation – a thinking through of the scenarios and how you will react if you get caught up in them.

I had the visit this week of a dear friend who was ordained at the same time as me. Alex’s nephew who was only 16 years old died a few weeks ago after taking an ecstasy tablet at a rave. It was the first time he ever took drugs and tragedy happened. His parents are trying to warrn other teenagers abut the dangers and trying to prepare them to be resolute in their stand against them if they are ever offered them in the future. We have to think through our courage and our resolutions.

Next week is the start of Lent. Maybe you are giving something up for Lent. Traditionally it starts with the temptation of Jesus and the testing of Jesus’ motivations and whether he had his head and heart in the right place from the outset. Thinking through your behaviour and reactions before you are called to respond to situations is vital for a good character, essential for a leader.

Why did God tell Joshua that he needed to be courageous? What was Joshua going to face that was so difficult that he would need to be courageous? His first task was to lead his army into Canaan and drive out the people who lived there.  
Sounds like an easy job, but remember, 40 years before this under Moses’ leadership he had sent 12 spies into the land of Canaan. They came back with stories of giants living in the land who made them look like grasshoppers. When the people heard this they became afraid and refused to enter the land.  
  
Do you ever feel like you’re facing an uphill battle? Do you feel like the odds are against you? Honestly, there are hundreds of times in our lives when we’re faced with situations that, to our eyes, seem impossible! There are outward circumstances like illnesses and disabilities, broken relationships, financial hardships, the loss of a job, etc. Then there’s the inner conflicts that test our faith, like attacks on our personal integrity, remaining faithful when no one is looking, enduring the sting of loneliness and separation, standing alone when you’re misunderstood. There are many times in our lives when we need to hear God’s command to Joshua, “Be strong and courageous.”

**Principle 2 Remember the Lord your God is with you**

Even though Joshua and his nation were small in comparison to the enemy, they had somebody on their side that would tip the scales in their favour. Just like Joshua and the nation of Israel, we may see ourselves as small in comparison to the enemy, but we have somebody on our side that is going to tip the scales in our favour.

God’s formula for success begins with, “Be strong and courageous.” But there is an addendum: “For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Real success is not a matter of strength and courage alone, but strength and courage that comes from the knowledge that God is walking with us.

One summer evening, during a violent thunderstorm, a mother was tucking her small boy into bed. She was about to turn off the light when he asked with a tremor in his voice, “Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?” The mother smiled and gave him a reassuring hug. “I can’t dear,” she said, “I have to sleep with Daddy.” A long silence was broken at last by a shaken little voice saying, “The big sissy.”

Don’t be afraid the lord your God is with you. Companionship makes all the difference.  
  
It would be very easy for us to look at this congregation with only our human eyes and human understanding and say, “We’re just too small and insignificant to make a difference. We don’t have the resources. Let’s just do what little we can and be satisfied with that.” It can be a weak excuse for weak faith. In God’s success formula the first thing we must do is be strong and courageous, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.  
  
**PRINCIPLE 3: OBEDIENCE TO GOD’S COMMANDS** (v. 7)   
Notice how the Lord delivers this to Joshua: “Be careful to obey ALL the law….”  
It would be convenient if we could pick and choose which of God’s principles and laws we could follow and which we found to be too demanding and too harsh. Imagine you’re looking for fruit in the grocery store, only you’re shopping for “principles.” “Let’s see I’ll take some joy. Here’s some love, I always like that. Patience and self-control…hmmm, sometimes that upsets my stomach. Forgiveness? I’m not in the mood for that today.  
The law that Joshua was given was very detailed, and God expected him to learn it, meditate on it, and apply it. We are not under that same law today, but we live by the same principles.  
Jesus said that there are two commands that are most important. What are they? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbour as yourself. Paul called love the fulfilment of the law; James called it the royal law.  
Whatever you call it, God’s formula for success wouldn’t be complete without it.  
  
**PRINCIPLE 4: SATURATION IN GOD’S WORD (v. 8)**

Sometimes you buy something, like a computer and you don’t read the instructions first but just get on with it, expecting it to be like other computers you have used. You make mistakes and it takes hours to put them right. If only you had read the instructions first!

That same principle is true when it comes to the Christian walk. Many of our mistakes could have been avoided if we had saturated ourselves in God’s word.  
One thing that has occurred to me is that ignorance is no excuse for acting stupid. The mistakes I made with my computer were made in ignorance, but that didn’t stop me from suffering the consequences for being stupid. My ignorance was a deliberate, voluntary ignorance. The information I needed was available.  
When we try to live without consulting God’s word, it’s a deliberate, voluntary ignorance. But that ignorance will not stop us from suffering the consequences for being stupid. The wisdom we need is available.  
It’s not just about reading it; it’s about meditating on it and letting God’s word saturate our spirit.

God’s Formula for Success and character building works, but there are no shortcuts. It calls us to be strong and courageous. It calls us to remember that the Lord our God is with us. It calls us to be obedient to His commands. It calls us to saturate our spirit with His word.

With help from Jerry Fenter:

<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/gods-formula-for-success-jerry-fenter-sermon-on-endurance-46916.asp>

1. C Pattersoon, Guardian, Feb 22nd 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)