**9th March 2014
Joshua 2:1-16**

The Oscars were given out this week and the Hollywood film factory had its party. It is common story line in spy thrillers that secret agents go and literally sleep with the enemy in order to get information. All the best secrets are learned in bed. It’s a dirty business but someone has to do it they tell themselves. James Bond will bed the babes in order to get to the baddies. Many people enjoy the twilight world of intelligence services in film or in novel and it is no different in the Bible!

Last week we started to look at the story of Joshua and how the Israelites would enter the Promised Land. They were told by God to be strong and courageous. Not to be afraid for the Lord their God was with them. I discussed the sensitivities of reading these passages about conquest and divinely sanctioned slaughter. I also talked about character formation – being bold and courageous. Today’s passage is very different. On this weekend when has seen International Women’s Day and the Women’s World Day of Prayer I get to preach on a passage all bout a prostitute.

General Joshua is preparing for his invasion of Jericho and needs reconnaissance. He sends two spies out to gather intelligence about Jericho. The King of Jericho also gathers intelligence about the Israelites and notes the entrance of tow Israelite spies into his city.

Scripture is full of earthy humour. It is a bit embarrassing at times, especially for the polite and pious. Most English versions of the bible tend to play down the innuendos intended in the original Hebrew. In verse one of chapter 2 we read that two men set off and came to the house of the prostitute named Rahab to spend the night there. The Hebrew verb translated here as ‘spend the night’ literally means lay or slept and it has a very different overtone when used in connection with staying at the house of a prostitute. The inference is that these two are sleeping with the enemy.

Again when the King of Jericho himself stops outside Rahab’s house and shouts in about the men who have ‘come to her’, his words surely suggest more than a polite visit. Indeed the King seems to go on to tease her for ‘professional one track mindedness. She’d thought their interest was in her – they had come to have her – the king knows they have come to have the land and the city.

What we make of this story will probably tell a lot about our prejudices. A few translators and commentators have sought to rescue Rahab’s reputation by a discreet change of terms. She is described in some bibles as a house keeper, or if that is not to grand a title, the landlady of a bed and breakfast establishment. Men and women of the world will quickly point out that they have heard about the goings on in seedy hotels and lodging houses too. I knew someone who worked in a Travelodge who was always shocked at the number of times couples, usually called Mr and Mrs Smith, and would rent a room in the middle of the day for just an hour.

Here Joshua’ spies are searching out the secrets of Jericho and where best could a stranger expect to meet the riff raff prepared to sell their country than a brothel. And maybe Rahab was also a foreigner too, owing little loyalty to the citizens who allowed her residence and employment only at their own convenience.

People get caught up in prostitution then and now for all sorts of reason. There has been sporadic and regular reports of sex trafficking – gangs tricking and trapping vulnerable girls usually from overseas into prostitution in this country – there was even an incident of that happening locally not so long back. Some women become sex workers, as they’re more euphemistically termed these days, due to economic necessity and even choice. There is good money to be earned. In Rahab’s day many widows were forced into prostitution because they had no other means to earn a living. In some societies part of the curse of widowhood and the attendant loss of status, income and protection is that a woman has to offer the only thing that many men want from a woman. It is sex or starve – as brutal as that. My eldest daughter is currently in New York on a school trip and is preparing to speak at a United Nations conference on the topic of young widows and how best to support them – and still in some parts of the world young widows end up in prostitution.

In this country MPs will soon be debating whether to introduce new legislation to target the people who buy sex and the pimps who profit but not the women who sell it. Buying and selling sex is illegal in this country but soliciting, kerb crawling and owning a brothel are not. The change in the legislation, to copy the Nordic model of Scandinavian countries, is designed to close loopholes that have allowed men to escape prosecution from abusing girls as young as 13. It targets the users and purchasers of sex and not the sellers. Though with the cuts to legal aid it maybe that no one can afford to use it!

Safe to say that the oldest industry in the world will not go away any time soon. Nor sadly will the abuse of women. To mark international Women’s Day the government has just introduced Clare’s Law which is a scheme to let people find out from police if their partner has a history of domestic violence. The Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme - known as Clare's Law - is named after 36-year-old Clare Wood who was murdered by her ex-boyfriend in 2009.

The remarkable thing about this story in the Bible is that a prostitute is used in the purposes of God. By the end of this story, Rahab protects the very lives of these Israelite spies.

The King of Jericho sends word to Rahab to bring out the men who have come to you – but she lies and says they are no longer with her and have escaped. It may say something about her reputation in Jericho that her word was accepted and her house was not searched. No official harassment here with the Police heavies shouldering down the door. Perhaps they were afraid that she may talk about her clients if they upset her. She was quick to hide the spires maybe because the laws of eastern hospitality and the ethics of her profession demand confidentiality. The king’s words made her take a quick decision about what might be in her own long term interest. The men stay hidden.

One important aspect of this story is the knowledge Rahab has of the Israelite people. In verses 8-14 she explains to the spies why she is protecting them from the king of Jericho. She knows that the Lord is with these people and has heard all the rumours about the Red Sea and the Jordan River. She has also heard about the defeat of the two kings of the Amorites. She has every right to fear these people because she knows full well the power of their God that leads them. Rahab also sees the inevitable doom of the city she lives in and she sees her opportunity. She wants to save herself and her family from death by pleading with these spies in verse 14. She also sees the opportunity to leave the broken poor life of prostitution by trying to help the Israelites. In other words, she’s poor, desperate, and wants out of the life she’s living. She doesn’t know the God of the Israelites fully, but she knows that there is hope among the Israelites.

The truth of the matter is that most people outside the church are just as fearful of us just like Rahab and the people of Jericho were fearful of the Israelites. It could be due to many reasons: perhaps they see us Christians and they assume that we have it all figured out. They see us with our smiles, and our perfect family life and they become frightened. Sometimes we let people believe that our lives are going perfectly, when we all know full well that they are not. We see the problems in our lives, the pain, the frustration and all the pressures we face, but to them we could seem like everything is so much better and so unattainable.

Another reason why outsiders of the church could be fearful of us is that we seem to have all the answers. We have our Bibles ready and sometimes people who are not Christians feel like we have all the nice little neat Sunday school answers for all life’s complicated problems. The truth is that life is too complicated for all the neat little Sunday school answers. We all know this full well, but to them we may make it seem like Christianity has neat little answers for everything. Sometimes we don’t allow them to see our struggles with who God is and why he is doing what he is doing. We may have a tendency to hide our vulnerability.

Non-Christians may have another fear and that is the fear that Rahab had: the fear of God himself. They may have been told that God himself is so sovereign and so much bigger than we are, that it seems either impossible for them or too good to be true. They can’t believe it. Yet there is a doubt, a fear at the back of their mind – what if it is true? In our culture today there is an emphasis on the individual and what I can do and who I can be. The idea that we as Christians are supposed to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily is a completely foreign concept to them. To surrender their hopes and dreams to this sovereign God sounds impossible and possibly terrifying.

The last reason I think non- Christians maybe scared of us and the church is that we’ve created an us versus them mentality. We’ve even created special words for this: secular and Christian, and Non -Christian. The divide between the church and people outside the church has become ever greater. Every community creates its own culture, which can often be hard for those outside the community to break in. I remember trying to get someone in the community to come to church and give us a try and her response was – those people are different to me – I wouldn’t fit in.

Going back to the passage from Joshua, we see that Rahab did not fit the mould of the Israelite community. She was not an Israelite, so she did not come from the same religious background. She was also a prostitute, which was an important separating factor in her situation. However, the important message of the story was the fact that the spies and Rahab had something in common. They were both desperate for God. The spies were dependent on God for their safety and their victories in battle. Without God the Israelites were completely powerless. Rahab was desperate for some hope of a better life outside of her poverty. Finding the common ground is always important for a point of contact.

To close the gap between church and those outside, I think the first practical way is to get to know people on a personal level. Non-Christians need to see us completely with strengths and weaknesses included. They need to know that we do have bad days and that we don’t always have an eternal smile on our face.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent was traditionally about repentance – becoming more aware of how sinful we are – how we mess things up, how we are far from perfect – the very opposite. All the reasons why we need forgiveness and need to forgive others and supremely need God’s forgiveness. Lent of course leads us to Easter and leads us to the cross and why Jesus went to a cross. The cross is so important, is the centre of our faith, nay even the centre of human history. This tells us who we are and who we are before God.

Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent, reminds us of our mortality and frailty. *We are dust and to dust we shall return*. Giles Fraser writing in the Guardian yesterday said that phrase is not the sort of cheery message one finds above the door of a gym or in the pages of those nauseatingly upbeat self-help manuals. Yet, the language of sin and death – both in Christian theology, the gift of Adam and thus a constituent part of the human condition – are he thinks, much more compassionate ways of looking at human beings than the alternative doctrines of continual self-improvement. This is counter intuitive he suggests. To use the language of sin sounds all terribly judgemental. But he quotes the novelist Marilynn Robinson[[1]](#endnote-1) : ‘The belief that we are all sinners gives us excellent grounds for forgiveness and self-forgiveness, and is kindlier than any expectation that we might be saints, even while it affirms that standards all of us fail to attain.’

I am talking about sin at the next session of the Christianity Explored Course at the Courtyard Café on Wednesday – you’re welcome to join me.

That course is primarily for those outside the church. Those outside the church also need to know that there aren’t always easy answers to tough questions. We need to be honest with them about the hard questions of our faith. We need to show them that there are sometimes grey areas that are hard to figure out. Besides breaking down the façade of Christianity, we need to represent Christ well. We show non-Christians who Christ is whether we realize it or not, and it is important that they know that there is joy in submitting to the will of the most high God. We also need to show them that God is a sovereign God, but is also a God of mercy. I believe that in our honesty and our humility we can help bridge the gap between the church and non-Christians.

Back to our story: Rahab lets the spies go safely and they promise her that when the invasion of Jericho happens she and all her family will be safe and they agree on how they will recognise her house.

She is not just saving her own skin. Its idle speculation about Rahabs connections with her family. Were they entirely dependent on her as the bread winner? She has, however briefly – the opportunity in her hands to influence events. Will she, like Joseph for example, grasp that chance and use it for the benefit of her family who do not deserve it of her? Chances come our way in life that give us the opportunity to influence for good – may God give us wisdom to realise when they are under our nose and to seize those opportunities.

Whether Rahab’s day to day relationships with her family were cordial or not, it was their responsibility to look after her, not the other way round. An unmarried woman, whether before marriage or after divorce, was in that time, the responsibility of her father. Rahab demonstrates a grasp of what is important to the Israelites – their understanding that God is faithful.

She asks the spies to keep faith with my family – the Hebrew word there for faith is ‘hesed’ – it means kindness and steadfastness – whatever happens. God is faithful to us, even if we are not faithful to God. They stand by you and stand by what has been promised against all odds. Steadfast love. It is the basis for a covenant of love like a marriage. Standing by someone whatever. Supremely we see it in God’s love towards us.

No one who is familiar with this characteristic of God, or who loves his standards, could mistake the terms of Rahab’s pact with her clients. It may become no surprise that Rahab is mentioned in the New Testament’s list of saints in the letter to the Hebrews chapter 11. Verses 30-31

‘By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days.

31By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.’

Rahab is mentioned when even Joshua himself is passed over in silence. And when James in his letter comes to develop the insight that faith if it has no works is dead illustrates his point by just two characters from the Old Testament: Abraham and Rahab (James 2.25). Note how both these writers emphasise not Rahab's words to the spies but her actions on their behalf.

Rahab had enough faith to believe that these men of God would indeed allow her and her family to be spared.

Rahab is also mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in the start of Matthew’s gospel. She finds herself in the family tree of Jesus. Not bad for a prostitute?

To sum up what the story of Rahab may say to us:

None of us are exactly perfect. Some of us have things in our past that we actually feel will prohibit God from loving us. Each of us has fallen short at some time or the other. Each of us has a little Rahab in us. However, these actions will not preclude any of us from obtaining grace from God or keep him from using us in his perfect plan. God can use the Rahab in Us! God can use anyone and anything to obtain an end result – even if those motives are about self-survival and self-interest.

But probably best not to visit a brothel just to find all that out!

with help from: Jillian: <http://liberalchristianity.blogspot.co.uk/2006/11/sermon-on-joshua-2.html> and DSB Joshua, Judges and Ruth A. Graeme Auld – St Andrews Press 1984

1. M Robinson, The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought [↑](#endnote-ref-1)