**16th March 2014**

**Joshua 6**

This is our last sermon on the book of Joshua so I will attempt to finish the story, though parts of it will feel speeded up. We will look at the famous story of how the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

One Sunday a teacher asked his Sunday School class this question: “Who broke down the walls of Jericho?” One young boy quickly responded, “It wasn’t me, sir!”

Indeed as we look at the story we will realise that the life of faith involves our part as well as the action of God.

Here’s a quick recap of chapters 3-5:

After the spies come back from Jericho and their nocturnal adventures with the prostitute Rahab, they tell Joshua that the Canaanites are full of fear towards the Israelites and that there will not be a problem with the invasion. So Joshua prepares the people to cross the Jordan River. The procedure was clear. The priests would carry the ark of covenant - the symbol of God’s presence and power - ahead of the people. It would symbolically demonstrate that it was God who would bring about the miraculous events necessary to get the right people, the Israelites, in the right land, to receive the right blessing.

But first the people had to be consecrated and they had to listen to the words of the Lord. This they do. Then they had to take action and follow the priest and the ark of the covenant in the waters of the Jordan – which like the Red Sea and the exodus under Moses out of Egypt, miraculously part to allow the Israelites to walk through.

Then Joshua appoints one man from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to take up a stone from the middle of the Jordan and plant it as a memorial. This monument would serve as a sign to future generations of the deliverance that they had experienced at God’s hand. The place where the stones were set up was later called Gilgal. Gilgal literally means ‘roll’. It would be here that God rolled away the reproach of Egypt. Commentators suggest that the monument reminds the Israelites of all the time in the wilderness when those in Egypt mocked them for having done the exodus and gone out of slavery but then having stopped and been stuck in the wilderness and not having entered the Promised Land. They got so far but did not press on to victory. The reproach of Egypt is the Egyptians mocking them that God wasn’t powerful enough or faithful enough to get them to the other side and to complete the job.

The memorial stones would provoke future generations of the Israelites to ask the question ‘what does this mean?’ How we need to provoke our children to ask ‘what does this mean?’ Why do we go to church? Why do we have faith? Rehearse those questions and have your memorials to faith around the place so that your family and friends literally trip up over them and ask the question why? I know someone who has a painting of a beautiful scene hanging on their wall. People will comment on why the have that painting and she’ll say how she was going through a difficult time and she came to this spot and prayed and felt God’s presence and support and guidance and it made all the difference. Personal memorials can help remind us of God’s work in our lives and make others ask ‘what do they mean?’, thereby giving us the opportunity to witness to our faith and experience.

Communion is our sign, as well as baptism in which we can communicate to each generation what it means for God to have acted for us in Jesus in Christ. Just explainging that to the kids is a great opportunity.

Passover takes place at Gilgal, which reminds the Israelitres of the Exodus forty years back. God had brought them out of slavery and bondage, so trust that God will bring you in to the land of provision and plenty.

Jesus of course will be compared to the Passover Lamb by the writers of the New Testament. His death is the way in which we come out of slavery to sin. The way we receive him in repentance and faith, turning from what we are and allowing him to do for us what only he can do, is also the way we are to live, in repentance and faith, turning from what we are and allowing him to do what only he can do. It is an act of faith in Christ who once brought us out of sin. It is an attitude of faith in Christ enables us each day to live a life of purpose.

In Gilgal, Joshua is also ordered to circumcise all the men. This was not a repeat operation but the re-establishing of a ritual neglected during the 40 years in the wilderness. It was important before they occupied their Promised Land to re-consecrate themselves to God and have the physical visible signs of that consecration, that setting apart, that loyalty and faithfulness to God.

Sometimes in our lives we may need to re-consecrate ourselves to God – maybe after a time when our faith has gone cold, or we have wandered off to a far country, to use the expression in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Though circumcision may be going too far!

After they have had a few days to heal (just a few!), the army of the Israelites is ready to go. For the first time in forty years they do not eat manna. They eat the real thing. They eat the produce of the land, the Promised Land – unleavened bread and roasted grain. It is a significant gesture of hope and faith. The Israelites had always grumbled about manna. Manna every day in the desert – is that all there is… grumble grumble. Some commentators have taken this as a picture of the Christian life, that people are sealed with the Holy Spirit yet not filled with the Holy Spirit. They are sustained by the Holy Spirit but not satisfied by the Spirit. They are nominally a Christian, but they haven’t yet entered into the joy of being a Christian.

Before they launch their assault on Jericho there is a curious story of Joshua meeting the Commander of the Lord’s army. Joshua is near Jericho and sees a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand and Joshua asks: are you with us or with our enemies?

The man replies neither. But as commander of the Lord’s army I have now come. Joshua falls face down in reverence and is told to take off his sandals. Because the place where he stands is holy. This obviously has echoes of Moses and the burning bush. He is in the presence of God – a theophany – the appearance, temporarily of God in human form – a kind of pre-incarnate Jesus. Maybe the emphasis on taking off sandals is that God wants Joshua to be his feet – to go where he wants him too. God is not on either side – but there is a still battle to be fought. It reminds me of the quote that in war time each side believed that God was on their side – when the right question was whether we are on God’s side?

The battle of Jericho happens – the Israelites circle the walls six times carrying trumpets and on the seventh time they are to blow the trumpets and give a loud shout. Seven symbolised completion – a special number in the Bible associated with the activity of God rather than the activity of humanity.

They do all that and the walls come tumbling down. The point is that they conquer without lifting a finger to touch, push or attack. The defeat of Jericho was the work of God, not the Israelites. Victory is won by God. They did not win the story without disciplined obedience and patience.

They rush in and take the city. They put to death people and livestock, preserving only Rahab’s household. They destroy everything else yet they take the gold, silver and bronze and put it into the treasury of the Lord’s house.

Achan decides to keep a bit of the treasure for himself. He is found out and consequently stoned to death for his disobedience. The rest of the book of Joshua is the story of how the Israelites continue to press into Canaan and defeat and conquer its inhabitants and become settled in their Promised Land.

Joshua of course is the OT’s classic example of Holy War. The various stories in the book show the central concern of the concept of Holy War, namely the (in Hebrew) *herem*, or sentence of total destruction on a population, civilian and on aggressor and expressly commanded by God. It presents a great moral difficulty for modern readers. What can be said? I’ll try and offer some brief comments before then discussing the spiritual aspects of pressing on for spiritual victory.

In its own context the herem has an intelligent theology involving God’s sovereignty over all nations. His ownership of the land and his right to grant to whomever he wishes his agency of military victory. And the right to remove from Israel any religious contamination.

It may help to remember that in OT times kings went to war and wrote up victories and attributed them to their gods. Joshua is Yahweh’s victory account. Understood in this way, it may be seen as belonging to its time, and as such superseded by other biblical perspectives on God, which present him as seeking the salvation of the whole word. The ideas of divine gift, dependence and even judgement still find echoes in the NT.

There is a tendency towards exclusivism in the OT. Only God, worship only the Lord your God – which presents the problem of what to do about those who don’t? Destroy them, tolerate them and try to win them over? Wait for the judgement at the end of the age? The OT ultimately keeps in view the purpose of salvation for all nations (Is 40.5, Jonah) and even sees the election of Israel as a means to that end (Gen12.1-3). The children of Abraham should be a blessing to all nations. Election as an end in itself becomes monstrous. We are the only chosen people – therefore the rest of you are infidels and need to be destroyed. This is when religion becomes absolutist and violent.

Our present text is part of the inner biblical dialogue because the Bible does have an internal argument with itself on many issues. Salvation for all nations is balanced by a concern for the preservation and purity of the chosen people.

Second, the idea of herem, holy war, can lead to a prevailing of the holy over the ethical, a judgement which the OT seeks to avoid by entering a justification in terms of God’s judgement on evil. The Canaanites are denounced for practising child sacrifice to the god Molech, and for using prostitutes in their religious ceremonies and magic and sorcery. They had forty years to change their ways, they had four weeks of the Israelites on their doorstep to acknowledge the true God – but only Rahab the prostitute converts – even though that was out of self -survival. They get their just deserts in other words. Judgemtn is enacted in this world through the messy theatre of war.

For the followers of one who told us to love our enemies and forgive those who persecute us it all presents difficulties. And that is the issue – the God we believe in is a Jesus Christ shaped God and if you believe in progressive revelation – our understanding of who God is changes over the centuries then you would say that was then – this is now.

Let me talk about now. What can the story of Joshua bringing down the walls and winning the battle of Jericho say to us now – individually and corporately as a church.

Maybe we are facing obstacles in our life. Maybe there are challenges ahead, battles to be engaged in. How can we press on to victory?

Here are some thoughts based on this story.

**First of all remember who is in charge.**

After receiving the report of the two spies, readying the troops, and crossing the Jordan, Joshua sought to ready himself. He evidently went out to survey the landscape around Jericho, perhaps to devise a battle plan. It was there that he encountered a man with a sword in his hand.

Cjhapter 5 v 13:Joshua approached him and asked, ‘are you for us or for our enemies?’. The man replied, ‘neither! I am here as captain of the army of the Lord.’

Joshua falls face down in reverence and is told to take off his sandals. Because the place where he stands is holy. This obviously has echoes of Moses and the burning bush. He is in the presence of God – a theophany – the appearance, temporarily of God in human form – a kind of pre-incarnate Jesus. Maybe the emphasis on taking off sandals is that God wants Joshua to be his feet – to go where he wants him too.

God is not on either side – but there is a still battle to be fought. It reminds me of the quote that in war time each side believed that God was on their side – when the right question was whether we are on God’s side?

Is God on our side- or are we on the Lord’s side?

I know life is not always clear – not always black and white as they say – but scripture tells us what the Lord requires: The prophet Micah puts it succinctly: To act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God’. We may agonise about guidance AND WHAT THE Lord wants us to do – but there is general advice to get us started – so long as we remember who is ultimately in charge.

Talk of battles can be problematic I know. The militaristic language can put many off. But let us not be squeamish. There is a battle for justice and a fairer world. There is a battle against the forces of evil and darkness that seek to rob us of our humanity, denying mercy to those who are vulnerable and blinding people to the love and friendship of God their creator. We are part of that eternal struggle, striving for the in breaking of the kingdom of God. This is not a time for complacency and apathy. But remember who is in charge.

When I look at the state of the church in this country I sometimes think we are losing some of the battles along the way. Then I need to remember, I have read the final chapter and we win. We may lose a few battles along the way, but the Lord has already won the war, and as long as we are on the Lord’s side, we are winners.

**Secondly see the vision.**

Chapter 6 v1-2: Jericho is bolted and barred to the Israelites. The Lord said to Joshua ‘See, I am delivering Jericho, its king and his warriors into your hands.

The word ‘see’ comes from the Hebrew word râw-âw, and it means to envision something: to see far beyond the physical realm of present reality to see something as it can, and will be. God’s call for Joshua to envision the fall of Jericho was based not upon Israel’s power and might, but upon God Himself, as He declared unto Joshua, “See**, I have given** Jericho into your hand…

Joshua knew what it meant to have vision of future things. He and Caleb were two of twelve spies sent in to spy out the promised land some forty years before. Like the others, Joshua and Caleb saw the inhabitants of the land; they had seen the fortified cities; but they also saw the blessings of God that lay before them, and while ten spies saw themselves as nothing more than grasshoppers in the eyes of their enemies who they thought were giants, Joshua and Caleb were visionaries, and tried to encourage the people to move forward to receive God’s blessings. Unfortunately then the Israelites listened to the other ten spies and gave in to fear and so stayed in the wilderness – a whole generation was wasted.

Solomon, in his great wisdom, declared in Proverbs 29:18 “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” The word vision is defined as simply a dream, or a revelation. I cannot help but think of the late Dr. Martin Luther King who often proclaimed: “I have a dream!” His dream, or vision was for equality for men and women of all races. Well, long before God appointed Joshua to succeed Moses and lead the nation Israel into the promised land, Joshua had a dream! His dream was to possess the land of Canaan. His dream was to receive and enjoy the promise of God. His dream was to live in a land of plenty in peace. It was something that he longed for so badly that he could taste it. He lived and breathed the dream.

What are you dreaming for? More telling – can you imagine it happening. Often that is the acid test for our plans – can you imagine it happening. Some people will say – I could never imagine me becoming a chef, or I can never imagine me overcoming my addiction. And lo and behold it doesn’t happen. Imagination is so key to hope and to bringing into reality what you hope for. Ask God to inspire your imagination.

Sports psychologists are into this – Roy Hodgson has just employed the services of one for the England football team: well you never know. I remember Linford Christie the British sprinter who won the gold medal for the 100 meters at the Barcelona Olympics saying just before the race he would phase out all distractions and imagine himself running the race and breaking the finishing tape before everyone else – that visualisation of a possible future was all important for him.

In your battles in life, in your health, your relationships, and your career – can you see a way forward? Be in prayer before God for that vision.

**Thirdly: God’s methods are not our methods so be open to surprise.**

I read about the Wacky Warning Label Contest the other day. The top prize went to a warning attached to a front-loading washing machine: “Do not put any person in this washer.” Coming in second was a label on a boat: “Never use a lit match or open flame to check fuel level.” My favourite was found on a mobile phone: “Don’t try to dry your phone in a microwave oven.”

The instructions that Joshua received from the Lord concerning how Jericho was to be defeated must have seemed rather strange. “You shall march around the city, for six days with seven priests carrying trumpets. But on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets and then make a long blast with the ram’s horn, and then all the people shall shout with a great shout; then the wall of the city will fall down flat.’

What do your think that the people of Israel were thinking as they marched around the city? What do you think these big macho warriors of Israel were thinking as they walked around the walls of Jericho for the first six days?

This is not what they expected. No doubt the inhabitants of Jericho had a few helpful words to say to them from their battlements as well!

Be open to surprises. God is not always predictable.

Perhaps every time they circled the walls they became more and more convinced that they could not conquer Jericho unless God gave it to them. Jericho’s walls were high; in fact it had a series of two other walls. The gates were massive and they were securely shut. Each circling of the wall must have advanced the realization that without God there would be no victory.
The old African American spiritual says, “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho… and the walls came tumbling down”. But that is not correct; God fought the battle of Jericho. Since Israel only marches and shouts there is no doubt who knocked down the walls of Jericho. God sometimes sets our contributions on the side lines in order that others can see that as Paul says in (2 Corinthians 4:7) “… that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.”

**Fourthly: be patient: the victory is ours if we don’t quit**

If you look closely at this chapter you will discover that Joshua did not tell the people how many times they were going to be required to circle the city or what the result of their marching would be.
Dr. Alan Redpath in his commentary on Joshua suggest that many people don’t see the answers to their prayers simply because they have stopped one round short in their conquest of their personal Jericho. We may have been doing the right things, but we simply stop doing them. Don’t quit too soon.

**Finally, it all takes faith.**

The Israelite needs faith to step out and cross the Jordan River. They needed faith to follow the instructions to march round Jericho ad blow trumpets and shout. They were told what to do but they still had to do it.

There is well known story of the man who was walking down a long, narrow path one night, not paying much attention to where he was going. Suddenly he slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he fell he managed to grab hold of a branch growing out of the side of the cliff. Not being able to see because of the darkness of night, he had no idea that he was just two feet from the bottom where he could safely drop without injury. Believing that he could lose his grasp and plummet to his death, he began to cry out for help.

He yelled…“Is anybody up there?”
A voice was heard, “Yes! I am here.”
Who’s that?” the man asked.
“It’s the Lord!”
“O, Lord! I am glad you’re here. Please help me!”
“Do you trust me?” asked the Lord.
“ I trust You completely, Lord.”
“Good. Let go of the branch.”
“What???”
“I said, Let go of the branch.”

The man said:
“Help!!! Is anybody else up there?”

Israel could have said to Joshua, “Have you really thought this thing through?” “Don’t you have a better plan?” No! They simply responded in faith to what they believed God had led them to do. They believed God and acted upon what He has said.

I heard about an enthusiastic preacher who was exhorting his congregation to become more active and to get moving: “Brothers and sisters, what this church needs is the energy to get up and walk.” One of the members shouted out: “Let her walk brother, let her walk.” The preacher, feeling energized now, said a bit louder: “But we cannot be satisfied with walking, we’ve got to pick up speed and run.” The same member chimed in: “Let her run preacher, let her run!” The pastor was really into the message now and declared: “Running is not enough either. One of these days the church has got to fly!” The same member replied, “Let her fly preacher, let her fly.” The preacher then said, “But if this church is going to fly, we’re all going to have to work harder and give more.” To which the member said with little enthusiasm: “Let her walk brother, let her walk.”

We may have our own personal Jerichos to face - where we are praying for the walls to come tumbling down. Can we see a way forward? Are we open to surprises, can we be patient for God’s way, and do we have faith to press on for victory even though it may cost?

As a church we are facing another one of those big decisions in the coming weeks as we have to decide whether to commit the money to our part of building the town’s new youth centre in our old manse. We have seen the vision for what benefits this could bring to our community, both in this church and also more importantly to our town. We know it’s not without its risks. We have been very patient so far – it’s been nearly two years in the planning and we haven’t quit - we have hung in so far. But it will cost – it may be of no surprise to some of you that it’s going to cost more than we initially expected – and it will test our resolve – though we do believe God has provided the money for us. We just need to believe that it is the right thing to do and for that we seek God’s vision for us once more in these coming weeks.

God grant us vision, make us open to surprises, give us patience and faith and remind us who is in charge.

With help from Oxford Bible Commentary and

<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/visionfaithactionvictory-jerry-dunn-sermon-on-doubt-48724.asp>

<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/five-principles-for-spiritual-victory-john-hamby-sermon-on-faith-43447.asp?Page=1>

**Across the barrier**

**Theme introduction**

Display a series of items that have the power to do something practical and useful (a tool, a torch, an item of protective

clothing, something used in cookery and so on). Ask if anyone can see what these things have in common. When the

congregation has guessed the connection, or when you have revealed it, say that there is another connection. The power

of each item is limited. For example, a torch has the power to help us see when it is dark, but is no use when making cakes;

a helmet has the power to protect our heads, but cannot saw wood. The items only have power when used for the proper

purpose.

Together, make a list of the ways we see God’s power in our own lives – in creation, healing, changing us and so on. Notice

that there is nothing bad on the list. God’s power only does good things! That is because God loves us and wants the best

for us. It is true to say that, with God’s power, anything is possible. The children will be exploring how God’s power enabled

his people to cross the River Jordan.

**Prayer idea**

Lead the following prayer. The leader should say the lines marked ‘A’, after which the whole congregation responds with ‘B’

and a small group of speakers with line ‘C’.

A When bad things happen in our world...

**B God of power, help us.**

*C There is nothing your power cannot do.*

A When we face bullies or people who try to hurt us in any way…

**B God of power, help us.**

*C There is nothing your power cannot do.*

A When we face problems and challenges that seem too big to handle…

**B God of power, help us.**

*C There is nothing your power cannot do.*

A When everything seems against us…

**B God of power, help us.**

*C There is nothing your power cannot do.*

**Extra idea**

As a way of praying for others, take a topical item in which people seem in an impossible situation. If possible, display some

visual evidence of this situation. Ask everyone to imagine this as a river in fl ood, impossible to cross. With God’s power,

anything is possible; so imagine the water being pushed back as in Joshua 3. Thank God for his power!

**Joshua 3:7-17**

This lection omits the part of the story that is of most interest to children- carrying 12 rocks from the middle of the dried river bed to make a pile that children could ask their parents about in the years to come.  So, I would add ***Joshua 4:1-7*** to the reading (FYI it appears nowhere in the RCL).  There are two ways to prepare worshipers to pay attention to the text.

*******Have 12 men carry one fairly big rock each down the aisle and pile them near the worship center.***  As they do, instruct worshipers to listen for 12 men doing the same thing in the reading.  During the sermon recall other structures that have been erected to remind people of their shared stories, e.g. national monuments.  Talk about the importance of knowing these stories.  Encourage families (both the parents and the children) to tell and talk about faith stories (e.g. read Bible stories).

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| Link to [Ark of the Covenant Picture](http://www.google.com/imgres?q=ark+of+the+covenant+images&hl=en&sa=X&rls=com.microsoft:en-us&tbm=isch&prmd=imvns&tbnid=izc25aTVOegh7M:&imgrefurl=http://www.templestore.com/catalog/product_info.php%3Fproducts_id%3D187%26osCsid%3D36d8ab1e09815320d3523218c573dbf9&docid=5ZjcTshvnKtsEM&w=700&h=554&ei=kmWETvHhO-fg0QGk1LAP&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=534&vpy=370&dur=7043&hovh=200&hovw=252&tx=142&ty=170&page=3&tbnh=139&tbnw=176&start=26&ndsp=12&ved=1t:429,r:10,s:26&biw=1080&bih=690) |

**** Introduce the ***Ark of the Covenant.***  Note that unlike Noah’s ark, the Ark of the Covenant is not a boat.  Show a picture of the ark and explain how it was used.  If you have the tablets from the Moses display ([Moses Display Overview](http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2011/07/year-propers-16-25-moses-display.html)), show them, wonder where the people kept them as they moved around the wilderness.  Put them in a golden box (wrap any box with gold wrapping paper) and tell about the Ark of the Covenant.  Finally, encourage worshipers to listen for the ark in the reading.

**** On the day before Halloween, this story tells of ***two acts of bravery that every single man, woman and child had to do*** – they had to walk across the dried up Jordan River and they had to leave the wilderness where they had lived all their lives to enter the Promised Land.  They had heard and loved the story about their grandparents walking through the divided sea to leave Egypt.  But, now they had to do the pretty much the same thing.  It is like walking into a haunted house or graduating into a new school.  You have heard other people have done it, but now it is your turn – and it is scary.

It is also like moving today.  Check out Alexander Who's Not (Do You Hear Me?  I Mean It!) Going to Move, by Judith Viorst, for a light-hearted but honest look at the feelings of a child who does NOT want to move.  (Yes, the same Alexander as in Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.)  Rather than read the entire book, you might just read the first page and show the picture on it.  I imagine there were some children feeling the same way on the edge of the Jordan.

*******One BIG problem!***  The list of the names of all the people who were to be driven out of their homes immediately reminds adults of today’s Palestinians.  Children may miss this entirely.  Or, if they are caught by the list of unusual names, older children may wonder who they were.  Those who tend to root for the underdog may ask what happened to those people and question whether it was fair of God to give their homes to other people.  Unless you see an easy answer to this, I’d avoid getting in conversations with children (especially in front of the congregation) in which the question could be raised.