

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.
(Hebrews 11:30-31)

American billionaire, Donald Trump, has made the news for all kinds of reasons

- While in Scotland, people seem to be keeping diplomatically quiet that his mother is from Lewis
- From the village of Tong, four miles from Stornoway
- Set in the Outer Hebrides, Lewis with Harris is the largest island of the Western Isles
- It retains a distinctive character, perhaps not least because of the ‘revival’ of 1949
- Looking back to that time, fervent writer Colin Melbourne writes:

So often when the original leaders pass on, their heritage wanes into formalism and death. It happened not only to John Knox (*a great Scottish preacher of the Reformation, explanatory note mine*), but also to John Wesley, and Martin Luther. The heart of the message is smothered by religious routines and forms, and within a generation, zealous Christian saints are replaced by traditional churchgoing sinners. This occurred throughout Scotland, and the rest of Great Britain. They call themselves Christian of course, attend services, and wouldn’t think of leaving home each day without reading God’s word, and holding family prayers. But they’re dead in their sins, not born again. Nominal ‘Christians’; Christian in name, but not in fact. You know people like that don't you? Even ministers. They need you and God to wake them up!

Colin Melbourne continues by describing the situation on the Isle of Lewis in the late 1940s

- There were no conversions, the young people were rebellious, lost, as he puts it, ‘in sinful pastimes’
- They likened becoming a Christian to catching the plague.

In Lewis, challenges of Christian leaders fell on stony ground – most people ignored the call to change

- But two elderly sisters (Peggy and Christine Smith) knew the living God and they were serious
- They began praying for the Island and two days a week from 10pm to 3am they laid hold of God in prayer
- Peggy was blind and Christine had terrible arthritis – they were not well enough to get to the church
- But they knew God and were passionate for his glory – and he met with them
- One of my most vivid childhood memories is hearing a great preacher from the revival, Duncan Campbell
- 20 years earlier, Duncan Campbell had been preaching as best he could, with all his energy and zeal
- But the congregation was content in its stiff, cold and dead religious routines
- Duncan Campbell felt prompted to ask a new believer to pray and the power of God fell
- A community was transformed, the message spread around the world, it was by the power of God
- But it was also through the instruments of two elderly sisters who humbled themselves and prayed

After the account of Moses, the writer to the Hebrews just passes over the 40 years of aimless wandering

- Not until the entrance into Canaan can a recital of the acts of faith be resumed
- Faith which consisted in the readiness to act in accordance with God's instructions
- By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days
- The whole story is bizarre in the extreme – yet the writer to the Hebrews calls such obedience 'faith'
- By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies,
- was not killed with those who were disobedient
- The act of Rahab in welcoming the Israelite spies was courageous – by faith she welcomed them
- The destruction of Jericho is yet another unpalatable Old Testament story
- But it does raise a question – what, if anything will God do to judge an unbelieving world?
- We see that God works in unexpected ways, through unexpected people and with unexpected results

I GOD WORKS IN UNEXPECTED WAYS

The story of Joshua and the commander of the army of the LORD (Joshua 5:14) is a mysterious one

- It reminds us of Jacob at Peniel and looks like another ‘theophany’ – a manifestation of God’s presence
- The first thing we have to notice is that what is decisive here is the presence of God
- Just as Moses had been commanded to reverence the holiness of God at the burning bush (Ex. 3:5)
- Similarly Joshua must take off his sandals, for the place where he was standing was holy
- And there is further news, Jericho has closed its doors and has trusted its fate to its walled defences

What follows is perhaps best described as a ‘ceremonial siege of Jericho’ – for there is no proper siege

- As a battle-plan, encircling the city once a day for six days was militarily no use at all
- But the commander of the army of the LORD has reassured Joshua with a promise of victory
- It is as if the circuits of the ark of the covenant were wrapping Jericho in a ring of God’s power
- There are no blood-curdling cries or war whoops, instead a sober, sacred silence, broken only by trumpets
- On the seventh day, the sevenfold encircling of the city ends with a climactic shout
- And by faith, for there can be no other reason than faith, the victory is won

When we think through the Bible about the mission of the people of God it is easy to find absurdity

- How easily Christians seem to want to succumb to worldly methods to effect God’ work
- The people of God are called upon to humble themselves and pray (2 Chron. 7:14)
- The people of God are called to study the scriptures because it is God’s word to us (2 Tim. 3:16; Mt. 4:4)
- The people of God are called to gather together to hear the word of God (Dt. 31:12-13; Heb. 10:25)
- The gospel is to be proclaimed and advanced by the foolishness of preaching (1 Cor. 1:21)
- The gospel is to be proclaimed by personal witness and a defence of the faith (Acts 1:8, 4:19-20)

II GOD WORKS THROUGH UNEXPECTED PEOPLE

In Joshua, the story of Rahab welcoming the Israelite spies precedes the conquest of the city

- But the writer to the Hebrews mentions Rahab after the conquest, presumably focusing on the outcome
- In human terms, Rahab appears to be the most unlikely person for God to use
- If the first readers of Hebrews were to guess the next person of faith following the conquest of Jericho
- They would not have been very likely to guess 'Rahab' – a name synonymous with prostitution
- From the point of view of Israel, she was a gentile, a woman and an outcast
- Yet the worldly-wise Rahab has come to saving faith

She put her life at risk to receive the Israelite spies in peace and hide them – what was her reason for doing so?

- She is contrasted with those who were 'disobedient' – instead her faith is shown in these words
- 'I know that the LORD has given this land to you' (Josh. 2:8)
- 'We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you (Josh. 2:10)
- The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below (Josh. 2:11)
- In the context of a city of unbelievers, Rahab stands out – somehow she believed that God would save her
- The writer to the Hebrews has already emphasised the critical importance of this (Heb. 10:39)
- What you believe about God and the things of God is critically important

God works in the lives of unexpected people – do we have a limited understanding of people God can use?

- Over the years I have experienced this at first hand in Methodist churches, circuits and committees
- Considering a probationer minister, a circuit steward will allay fears, 'not necessarily young'
- In fact, fears need to be allayed that the person we are trusting that God will use will be:
- Not young, not old, not foreign, not a woman, not a man, not disabled, not too educated, not uneducated

III GOD WORKS WITH UNEXPECTED RESULTS

The first unexpected result in the story is that Rahab and her household were saved

- We can say that it is only by the grace of God that she was saved – but that grace was taken by faith
- And, in one sense, that is easy enough for the 21st century mind to accept
- But the fate that befell Jericho, its destruction, is not easy for the 21st century mind to accept at all
- And the question that we must ask is what are we to make of this and similar stories in the Bible?

The first answer, and I think a line commonly taken today, is simply to ignore it (just read the nice parts)

- The difficulty with that is that we create what is known as a canon within the canon, or no canon at all
- To paraphrase George Orwell, the Bible is the Word of God but some parts are more his word than others
- Or as the incredulous Bible reader said after an Old Testament passage, ‘This is the Word of the Lord?’
- A second answer, favoured by more liberal Bible readers, is the notion of ‘progressive revelation’
- This is popularised by the simplistic statement that the OT God and the NT God are somehow different
- And the conclusion that love and grace (supremely revealed in Jesus) always trump wrath and judgment
- The problem is that there is plenty of wrath and judgment in the NT, even in the teachings of Jesus
- The most difficult option, favoured by more conservative Bible readers, is the idea of Biblical theology
- In short, this looks at what the whole Bible has to say and shows how particular themes develop

Today, we don’t expect God to order the destruction of a city – as the destruction of Jericho was commanded

- But is that to do with our pre-conception of God and is our pre-conception of God the right one?
- the book of Joshua reveals the righteous anger of God against his opponents
- But his mercy and compassion towards those who turn to him – but isn’t that what we believe?
- Isn’t it the case that Christians experience both these aspects of God’s character in Jesus

I am not saying that I don't find the slaughter of the Canaanites difficult – I find it very difficult

- I find God's eternal judgment against sinners difficult too – is that because the Bible is wrong?
- Or, without even attempting to give short and simple answers to difficult questions
- Do I, at least have to concede, that what ought to startle me in the Old Testament story
- Is not that the judgment of God comes on those who do not believe, whether through flood
- Or plague, or the death of the firstborn, or drowning in the Red Sea
- But that by the grace of God, some are saved? And ought that not to be the case here?
- I can spend all my time worrying about the fate of the unbelieving Canaanites
- And not enough time worshipping the God who shows grace and mercy to those who believe?
- However much I don't like it, what if Jericho is an earthly sign of a much greater judgment?

But we must return to the main themes – God works in unexpected ways

- If you feel that the church is wandering through the wilderness – ask are we following God's way or ours?
- God calls us to pray, to study the scriptures (personally and together), to preach and witness faithfully
- The focus of the Word is the death and resurrection of Jesus and forgiveness through faith in his blood
- We need to focus afresh on the basic things – personally and together – expecting Jesus to break through
- When we say, either people won't listen or it is outdated or too difficult, do we deny the unexpected?
- God works through unexpected people – Rahab the prostitute, the two elderly sisters in Lewis
- We need to celebrate and embrace the idea - God is at work in all kinds of ways with all kinds of people
- The challenge is to believe that if we are faithful he can work through us
- The cross and resurrection of Jesus are the decisive victory in the eternal, cosmic battle
- But that does not mean that the war is over – until then: God will continue to work in unexpected ways
- He will continue to work through unexpected people and with unexpected results