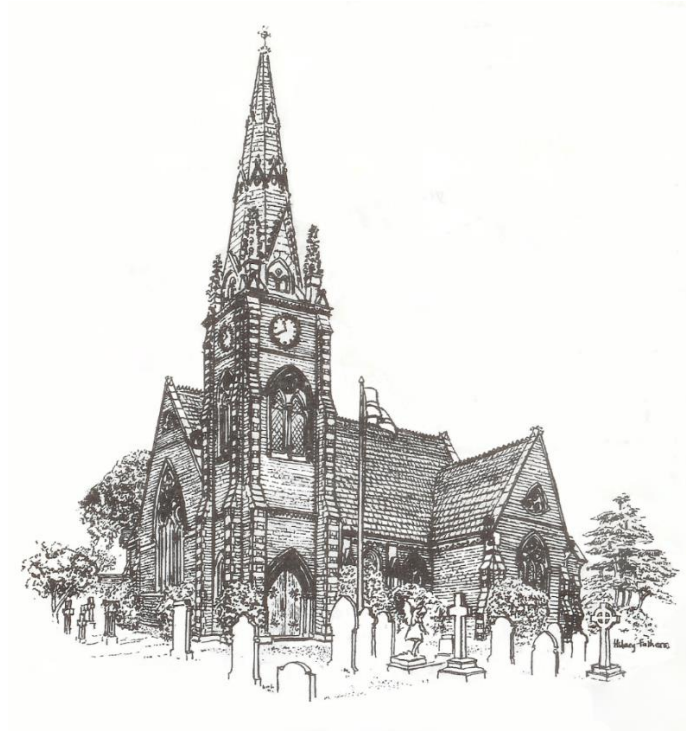


All Saints' Thornton Hough



**Lent 2021: On the Bible's back roads
Where old stories and our stories meet.**

Week 2

Wednesday February 24th: Balaam: [Numbers 22: 1-38](#); [24: 1-13](#):
'I could not...go beyond the command of the Lord'



Donkeys, Nazareth Village reconstruction

Do we go along with the crowd or do we listen to what our heart is telling us? Do we 'follow the money' or do we focus our lives on doing the right thing regardless of the financial cost? These are the sorts of questions thrown up by the story of the somewhat enigmatic Balaam. He is depicted

as a sort of professional soothsayer, a cross between a prophet and a diviner, on hire to Balak, the king of Moab, with the specific job of cursing the advancing Israelites who are threatening his territory as they continue their journey to the Promised Land.

In the Bible his subsequent reputation seems to have suffered somewhat as in the New Testament, both Peter (2 Peter 2 v 15-16) and Jude (v 11) disapproved strongly of his 'cash for curses' mode of employment. However today's reading, complete with talking donkey, represents an occasion when he was demonstrably unable to do his job in the way his royal employer required of him.

Balak hires him for the simple reason that he is terrified of the Israelites following their military victory over the Amorites (22 v 2-3). As far as he is concerned, if Balaam does his job properly, for which he will be extremely well remunerated (22 v 17), Balak will at least have a shot at defeating them (22 v 6). It sounds a bit like an ancient version of something called the 'speech act theory' in which forms of words in and of themselves carry out an action. At a key point in the wedding service the celebrant says of the couple being married, 'I therefore proclaim that they are husband and wife'. The words perform the action; the couple are now married (unlike in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *The Mikado* in which if you say it's done you can pretend it's done which sums up much of the political life of

the early twenty first century). So, in the same way, once Balaam has pronounced a curse on the Israelites, they are cursed – end of!

On the surface, it's a pretty straightforward job – curse the Israelites and collect the money. The problem is that he simply can't do it. He is not an Israelite but nonetheless he starts having conversations with God which render him powerless to curse and therefore cost him his fee. Like all of us, he appears to have had mixed motives, which explains why, even after agreeing to go with Balak's men at God's behest (v 20), he then finds his way blocked by an angel (v 22f) – perhaps he had had second thoughts overnight and remembered the money on offer!

Following his conversation with his donkey (reminding us that, whatever the historical core of this story, it has clearly been embellished!) and his encounter with an angel en route, when he finally meets Balak he fully and finally realises that cursing those whom God has blessed can't be done. In other words, he has to do and say the right thing in spite of any financial misgivings he might have had. In Numbers chapters 23 and 24 Balaam's words of blessing are recorded for us and the message is unambiguous; if even a mercenary soothsayer who seems to be devoid of any moral compass ends up, for once in his life, doing and saying the right thing, how much more, as God's people, should we listen to his still, small voice when faced with difficult choices in life. It might well be that the course of action that God calls us to is very far from being the most financially advantageous, the least complex or the easiest. But when we know in the core of our being where God is leading us we just need to do the right thing. This is not the same as being reckless and we always need to stop, think and pray rather than rush headlong, taking into account what our sense of vocation (whether that be a major decision affecting our career or a sense that someone in need requires our help) will mean for those we love and care for. But we are called to offer an alternative way of doing life to the one that obsesses over financial gain, ambition, looking good and finding significance in what we possess rather than who we are. Our spiritual health depends on it.

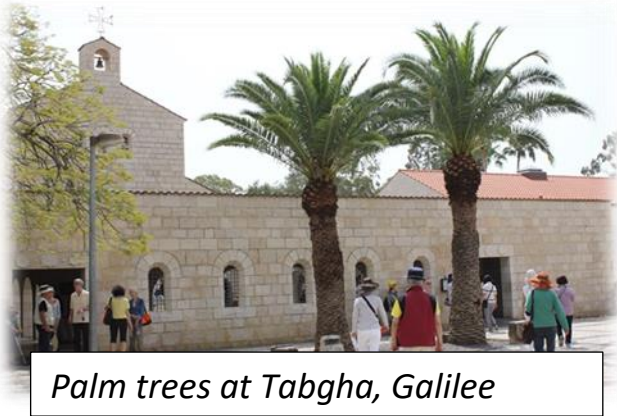
It's worth bearing in mind that Moses, not mentioned in this story as such but hovering over it as the leader of the people who are disturbing Balak's peace of mind, himself gave up a position of privilege in Egypt to follow God's call to set his people free. As Christians we need also to remember that Jesus lived with and ministered to those on the margins of society rather than its movers and shakers, and brought blessing to many who were living without hope. We are called to

extend that blessing as we share his love, work for justice and peace, come alongside the broken hearted, give generously and pray for those in any kind of need. Framing our lives around what is advantageous to us without giving any thought to the needs of others is a road to nowhere. This will have implications for how we use the resources entrusted to us by God (especially as those living in one of the richest nations on earth in which the divide between the rich and powerful and the poor and most vulnerable is stark). It also has implications for how we respond to such things as the way global trading arrangements benefit wealthy countries and how the effects of climate change are visited most lethally on those least responsible for them. Let us learn not to be a curse to those who suffer because of our desire for a comfortable life and learn to be a blessing as we (with reference to the examples given above) buy responsibly and reduce our carbon footprint. It will mean some giving up on our part but we do this and more as those who follow the one who gave up everything for us.

Questions: Why is the love of money the root of all evil? What might we need to give up in order to respond to the challenges of climate change?

Prayer: Lord, help us when we make important decisions to do the right thing rather than that which suits us best. Amen.

Friday February 26th: Deborah: [Judges 4: 4-16](#); [5:1-9](#): 'I, Deborah, arose'



My imagination tells me that the time of the Judges must have been a bit like the Wild West. The very last verse of the book articulates this, 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit' (Judges 21 v 25). The Israelites are now established in the land of Canaan but enemies such as the Midianites and the Amalekites are also about co-existing uneasily with them

meaning that conflicts are breaking out on a regular basis. The people of Israel are also subject to a self-inflicted internal vicious cycle which might be summed up as follows:

- The Israelites sin against God and are overcome by their enemies as a result.
- They come to their senses and cry out to the Lord for help.
- He sends them Judges (such as Deborah) to deliver them.
- They are delivered from danger and once again live in peace (until the next time!).

It is significant that one of the Judges that came to prominence and got them out of trouble was a woman. Deborah is introduced to us as a prophet and the leader of Israel at the time in which our passage is set (4 v 4). The story, as is normal in the book of Judges, involves a level of violence which doesn't sit comfortably in an age when we see the suffering caused by conflict regularly on our television screens. Deborah is instrumental in delivering Israel in a story that famously ends up with a woman called Jael driving a tent peg through the head of Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army, an act which leads to the destruction of their king.

Whilst military strategy is certainly part of Deborah's job description, it also included regularly settling disputes between members of the Israelite community; something that Moses did, as we saw the other day, during the wilderness wanderings. Mainly because much of it is, the Bible can come across as heavily patriarchal; the vast majority, if not all of it, was written by men and its protagonists are also mainly male. It sometimes feels that we struggle to hear a female voice at all. Reflecting on this, I am reminded that when I was ordained in

1983, less than forty years ago, all those ordained with me were men. It wasn't until 1994 that the first women were ordained as priests in the Church of England and the first woman bishop was not consecrated until 2015. In both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches women are still excluded from ordained ministry. There is still a long way to go!

And yet Deborah is not alone as a biblical woman carrying leadership responsibilities. In the New Testament, the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus was Mary Magdalene, who is sometimes known as the 'apostle to the Apostles' because she was the first to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead (John 20 v 18). A careful reading of the Acts of the Apostles reveals that women were very much involved in the leadership of the church. In Romans 16, Paul refers to Priscilla and Aquila as 'my co-workers in Christ Jesus' (v 3), meaning most obviously that they shared his evangelistic ministry and explicitly identifies Junia as an apostle (v 7). The evangelist Philip's four daughters all shared a prophetic ministry (Acts 21 v 9) and the establishment of a Christian community in the house of Lydia strongly suggests (to me, at least) that she was exercising a leadership role (Acts 16 v 40). When Paul wrote to the Christian community in Galatia he affirmed that, 'There is neither...male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3 v 28) he is implying that the social gulf in his time that made it a man's world in every way was not to be reflected in the life of the church in which all are equal in God's sight and where all, regardless of gender, are gifted by the Holy Spirit for all kinds of ministry. Goodness me, it's taking us a very long time to get a handle on Paul's radicalism!

The fact that these references exist in the Bible, written as it was over a long period of time in which patriarchal assumptions went largely unquestioned, is surely significant. Those assumptions, which have been unchallenged in most societies for most of human history, have still not been consigned to history, as the #MeToo movement highlighting the continuing abuse resulting in large part from them, has demonstrated. These assumptions mean that God is still overwhelmingly spoken about, written about and addressed as male, as in 'Our Father...' I wrote a blog post a while ago in which I used the word 'she' to refer to God and it was clear from the response that people still find this a difficult concept even though there are places in the Bible where female images are used with reference to God. For example in Isaiah 49 v 15 God says, 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.' It demonstrates the enduring power of patriarchal

assumptions that need challenging at every level in church and society if we are to reflect the inclusive love of Jesus.

At a time when men were overwhelmingly in charge of everything, it was Deborah's wisdom and good judgement that led to her breaking the glass ceiling and assuming leadership of the people of Israel. It has been noted that a number of the countries that have coped best with the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic including Germany, New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Taiwan and Bangladesh are all have female leaders. I find that deeply significant. The Inclusive Church movement widens this out calling for an end to discrimination in the church on the grounds of, 'disability, economic power, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, learning disability, mental health, neurodiversity, or sexuality'. The calling of Christians everywhere is to make that statement real and visible in the life of the church, and the time is now. We have some work to do!

Questions: What do you think Paul means when he says, 'there is neither male nor female'? In what practical ways does discrimination need to be addressed in the life of the church?

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the inclusive love of Jesus that reaches out to the overlooked and rejected. Help us to offer his unconditional love in our lives and churches. Amen.

Sunday February 28th: Ruth: [Ruth 1: 1-18](#): 'Your people will be my people'

A few years ago, one of my brothers sent off a DNA swab to get an idea of our family's ethnic origins. The result showed that while just over 80% of our origins are 'British and Irish'; we are apparently 8.8% Iberian, 6.2% Eastern European, 3.6% Ashkenazi Jewish and 0.8% Finnish. The Iberian ethnicity is explained by the fact that between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago, a time when there were only a few thousand inhabitants in the British Isles, Iberian fishermen migrated from what is now Spain across the Bay of Biscay and are now thought of as the indigenous inhabitants of Britain. It is a reminder that every single one of us is descended from people who migrated here from somewhere else. Some of these migrations were for economic reasons (the Windrush generation), others came as invaders (Romans, Vikings and Normans) and others came as refugees, fleeing persecution and poverty (Huguenots). This perspective should profoundly inform and shape our response to migration today. The fact that migrants, many of whom never wanted to leave their homes but were compelled to do so by conflict and poverty, often find themselves confronted by barbed wire and the message, 'you are not welcome here, go back home' is both unbiblical and a denial of our own ethnic origins.



Street corner in Bethlehem

I write this just days after yet another family doing exactly what Ruth did lost their lives. Rasoul Iran-Nejad, his wife Shiva Mohammad Panahi and their children Anita, Armin and Artin, having fled Iranian Kurdistan, drowned in the English Channel trying to join family in the UK. Ethnic Kurds are a minority group in a number of Middle Eastern countries including Iran. Every day they face discriminatory underfunding and

those who protest about their situation are liable to find themselves facing arrest, torture and death. Rasoul and Shiva wanted to reach Britain and put their lives in the hands of one of the many criminal gangs who put people in overcrowded, unsafe boats to cross the Channel and don't give them another thought. They were desperate to find somewhere to bring up their children without the constant threat of violence.

We have all been made aware the dreadful conditions in which many migrants live, whether they have taken the decision to flee their home countries or, like the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar, been forced out at the point of a gun. If we want to read the book of Ruth and hear God speak to us through it, we will find ourselves unable to close our hearts to the urgency of the need. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law and her family were themselves economic migrants as desperate as their contemporary counterparts to flee famine and poverty.

The opening verse of the book of Ruth provides us with its setting in 'the days when the Judges ruled' (v 1). We already know that this was a time of instability and fairly constant conflict. Well, it was if we consider the stories of Israel's leaders anything to go by. The movingly beautiful story of Ruth reminds us that we mustn't overlook, in any society at any time, the stories of ordinary people trying to live their lives and do the right thing in difficult circumstances; another perspective to take into account in considering migration today. The picture of Bethlehem reflected in this story is of a place where people can find a home, look out for one another and talk to one another when issues, such as who will take the responsibility of a 'kinsman-redeemer' in marrying Ruth, come up.

One important detail easy to miss as we read between the lines is that at the beginning of the book, they found hospitality and shelter in Moab (a traditional enemy of Israel), so much so that Naomi's sons both married Moabite wives. And following the tragic deaths of all of their husbands Naomi and her two daughters-in-law share a moving conversation that takes up the second half of our reading. It is framed around the 'hesed', the loving kindness of God that Naomi wishes both Ruth and Orpah to experience. Whilst Orpah decides that she belongs back with her own people (and is not in any way judged for this), Ruth feels that she belongs with Naomi and her people. This sense of belonging goes beyond just living in a particular community. When Ruth says to Naomi that, 'your people will be my people and your God my God.' (v 16), she is expressing her total commitment to her new community. This is not saying that she would have been judged if she had not committed herself to Israel's God and is not therefore a proof text telling us that when today's refugees arrive at our shores, they should immediately adopt our cultural norms.

What it is saying is that there is something beautiful about Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law and the deep love that existed between them. They are two women who both know what it is like to lose loved ones and leave their homes

and in this conversation, we see them exploring personal loyalty and what it means to belong in ways that change their lives. In the case of Ruth, it brings her to Boaz who goes the extra mile to protect her and eventually marries her. So from what perspective do we see those who have had to leave their homes and communities? How can we seek to protect and provide hospitality to the most vulnerable members of the communities in which we live and the wider world we are part of? How can we express the 'hesed', the loving kindness of God, to those who find themselves grieving for the loss of home and family? Our response could involve giving, campaigning and action. We might want to support an organisation such as the aptly named Boaz Trust (www.boaztrust.org.uk) working with destitute asylum seekers in Greater Manchester. Christian Aid (www.christianaid.org.uk) works with refugees around the world.

Many people today, for all sorts of reasons, turn their back on refugees and migrants as if it's 'nothing to do with me'. Followers of Jesus cannot do that because that is not what he did. He stopped at the gate of Jericho for Bartimaeus (who we will meet again later), a blind man who had been excluded from his community and was begging on the streets. In doing so he cut right across those who were telling him to shut up and go away and, in loving him and healing him, demonstrated exactly the loving kindness we see in the book of Ruth. Jesus stopped; think about that. He stopped when he could have acceded to the crowd's wishes and carried on out of the city. We too need to stop and hear the voices of those who are leaving home because their homes have been destroyed, who are drowning trying to cross the English Channel and who feel that nobody wants to offer them hospitality, welcome and a place to belong. In doing that we may need to think through how far we have come in overcoming our own inborn prejudices because those who end up far from home are, in an important sense, as much family as our own loved ones.

Questions: How have we responded to the needs of those who have become refugees? What more could we do?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you yourself were a refugee in Egypt and know what it is like to have to leave home. Help us to open our hearts to the victims of war and poverty and help them, through the compassion and loving kindness of strangers like us, find, like Ruth, a place to belong. Amen.

