

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



Palm trees at Tabgha, Galilee

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.