

10 September 2017: Courage (Joshua)

Have you heard about land invasions? These occur when people move in and set up their homes on land which is not theirs. Usually the owner arrives and throws them out. In the Promised Land the inhabitants didn't regard the whole land as theirs; they just controlled the cities where they lived. So, when the Israelites moved in, they may have been bothered by their numbers but they didn't get upset because they were on their land. However, they did get upset when they heard how the Israelites had crossed the River Jordan! They were horrified to think that the God of the Israelites might be more powerful than their gods! In fact, the Bible tells us that "their hearts melted" (Josh 5:1). Despite their secure towns, despite their strong warriors, they felt doomed.

And that's exactly how they should have felt. God had used the miraculous crossing of the river to prove that Joshua was his choice as leader. The Bible says that the people "stood in awe of him [Joshua], as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life." (Josh 4:14). He was to oversee the conquest of the land and his courage is recorded in the stories in the book of Joshua.

But while Joshua was the earthly leader, God made it clear that he was still in charge of the Israelites. Once, when Joshua was standing near Jericho, possibly thinking about how to attack it, he suddenly became aware of a man standing over him with a drawn sword. Like a good soldier, Joshua challenged him: "Are you friend or foe?" "Neither" was the answer! "I am here as the commander of God's army!" God was still with them!

The Israelites' first task was to tackle the big city of Jericho. Could they do conquer it? That wasn't even necessary. God made it clear that *he* had already "handed Jericho over to them" (Josh 6:2). So they followed God's very strange instructions. All the warriors had to do was to follow the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant and to march round the city each day in dead silence. The Ark was the symbol of God's presence guiding his people. If the people of Jericho were already terrified, imagine how scary that silent marching must have been. Then, on day seven, the citizens got a terrible shock. Instead of marching once, this army marched round seven times. Suddenly the silence was shattered: the trumpets sounded and the warriors shouted! And the walls fell down. God's family could charge straight in! The only family which survived was the family of Rahab, a prostitute. She had realised that God was real and proved her faith by helping to protect the spies who had come to check out the city. She became an Israelite and her name is mentioned later in the Bible as King David's was her great grandson.

After the fall of Jericho, the other cities waited in fear for the army to come to them.

The next town in the path of the Israelites was the smaller town of Ai. Their spies told the Israelites that they could easily conquer it. In fact, they informed them that they needn't send the whole army – just about 3000 soldiers. God would be with them and they would win.

But it didn't happen that way. Instead, the soldiers from Ai chased the Israelite soldiers away, eventually killing 36 of them. Oops! Now it was the turn of the Israelites to be afraid and their hearts turned to water (Num 7:5).

Why hadn't God helped them? Joshua went and complained to God in prayer. All the other towns would hear about this and would think their God was weak! What was God doing?

God's answer was that he couldn't help the people if they didn't respect his laws. Just as before, his people had sinned. They had been told to trust God to provide everything they needed, and not to take anything from Jericho. The people had to trust him, not things! They were not to 'covet'.

And somebody had taken something from Jericho. Before God would help them again, those stolen items had to be destroyed. So, the next morning Joshua called everyone to stand before him in their tribes. God revealed that the problem was in the tribe of Judah. So the families of Judah stood out in front of him – and eventually it was discovered that Achan had disobeyed.

Achan admitted to Joshua that he had stolen a beautiful cloak, some silver coins and a bar of gold. He had buried them in his tent so his whole family must have known what he had done! He went and dug these items up and brought them to Joshua. But think what trouble he had caused the people!

Achan and his family died that day. This makes God sound mean, doesn't it? But God's people had to realise that God is holy. This means that he is absolutely perfect and that he cannot tolerate evil or wickedness. Achan's sin made a barrier between God and his people and they would not see God's power until that sin had been dealt with. When it was, God's people were able to conquer Ai easily.

But this story is a scary reminder: We all sin (The Bible reminds us that if we don't know that, we are fooling ourselves!). We mustn't expect God just to overlook our sinfulness. He sees everything and hates sin – just as he saw and hated Achan's sin.

But, unlike Achan, we don't have to die for our sins. Jesus stepped in. He was punished on our behalf when he died on the cross. So, "if we confess our sins, he ... will forgive us our sins" (1 John 1:9). The consequence of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life (Rom 6:23). This means we can be sure that, if we die trusting God, there is life on the other side of death. But it also means that our life here will be easier because we don't have to fight any battles without God at our side.

Are you a Joshua –trusting God – or an Achan – trying to fix things yourself?