

There are a few parallels between today's passage in Joshua 8 and that of Joshua 4, which was the text the last time I preached at Kinross. Both describe acts of dedication following momentous events. In Joshua 4 it was the crossing of the Jordan, it marked the start of something new and a land of opportunity. Today, in Joshua 8, the people gather again, but in a different mood. Yes, Jericho has fallen by God's hand, but at Ai, a much weaker city than Jericho, 36 Israelites were killed and their army routed. Caused, so the narrative of Joshua tells us, because Achan sinned against God and kept some of the spoils of war for himself. Because of his crimes against God, which led to the death of 36 people, Achan is sentenced to death. He is stoned, then cremated, and then buried beneath a huge pile of stones. After this, the Israelites are able to take Ai and reduce it to ruins, a heap of stones, which is the literal translation of its name.

Then, according to Moses' parting instructions (Deuteronomy 27), the Israelites build an altar of unhewn stones, cover it in plaster, and write the law of Moses upon it. They remind themselves of what God expects from them as well as how God intends to bless them.

So at the Jordan, we saw a cairn of twelve stones that were to stand for all time as a reminder of what God had done for the Israelites, now Achan lies dead beneath a pile of stones, while Ai was reduced to rubble, and the Israelites piled up stones to form an altar. Stones of celebration, stones of sin, stones of victory, stones of sacrifice. It is on these stones of sacrifice that we reflect on today.

Joshua 8 doesn't quite feel the same as Joshua 4, does it? As we inhabit this story, it is difficult to preach in a positive tone. There is a different atmosphere this time around. Perhaps made worse that it was commanded by Moses, before even setting foot in the Promised Land. Did he suspect that the Israelites would have to rededicate themselves after failure or was he hopeful this occasion would be as joyous as the Jordan? Either way, we've been forced to face reality a little too quickly. That feeling of opportunity and possibility as we crossed the Jordan has gone, as the Israelites are forced to bury their own, their sense of invincibility challenged. As they stand, listening to Joshua tell them the Law of Moses

on the hillside, reading them the riot act, as it were, the illusion that the Israelites could be an unblemished people has been shattered.

When I asked you three weeks ago what grounded your faith, I wonder if any of you thought of negative stories, more akin to that to Ai rather than the crossing of the Jordan. Because it is not always easy, is it? Things don't always unfold according to plan. Indeed this week has not been a triumph of humanity. As the conflict between Israel and Hamas and Hezbollah has escalated into Lebanon, with Iran responding with missile attacks, we have not had a week steeped in a sense of the New Creation. Paul Adams and Tom Bennett, journalists from the BBC wrote that, "We're not seeing an all-out regional war just yet, but with so many players feeling that have a stake in it, the war in Gaza has metastasised in a dramatic fashion."

Metastasised, like a cancer. A year on from the Hamas attacks Be'eri and it is not good news. The mood in our reading and in our world today is far from light.

So I wonder what we do, in these times? I've drawn attention to the conflict in the Middle East, given the anniversary and the escalation, but really there are so many things that could be highlighted, across the world but also within our own lives. What is our response when life is turned upside down? When our expectations have to be recalibrated? It is all very well building a monument to success, but how do we commemorate our failures within our understanding of our faith?

The truth is, there is space for both celebration and lament in the rhythm of our Christian lives and in our worship. Nowhere in the Bible are we asked to pretend that everything is fine, instead, the narrative of our faith expects failure: personal, collective, natural, structural. Yet, it also offers hope to each of those things through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I asked you what you were reminded about as you came to church this morning because this building, these people, our worship together, are all there to remind us of what we believe, what we stand for. Just as the Israelites were reminded of their values as the Law of Moses was read. And part of those values involve how we deal with the bad stuff, with sin, with the problems of the world. That can be something we don't want to be reminded of and I have dragged the news into worship today, amidst valid

arguments about media fatigue and compassion fatigue, but we, like the Israelites following Ai, need a mechanism for addressing the sin that is within us and around us.

For the Israelites, they were reminded on their covenant with God. There are blessings for doing things in the agreed way and curses for when you stray. The holiness and sovereignty of God needed to be upheld, as humanity and God attempt to dwell together. The events around Ai have put the relationship is under strain. I wonder how many Israelites threw those stones at their brother in righteous zeal before confidently marching off to take Ai? How many knew that Achan hadn't done anything that they weren't tempted to do themselves? How many approached Ai with hesitant steps knowing that victory was not guaranteed? How many wondered whether the risk of drawing near to God's holiness was worth it, could they even keep these commandments that Joshua read to them?

We aren't on the cusp of possibility by the river Jordan, but taking those steps into the land, and what once seemed straightforward is beginning to fracture. Do we inhabit that same space as Christians, do we share those doubts, those fears?

There was a detail in the text, that gave me something to hang on to. In verse thirty-one, we are reminded of the law of Moses that states that only unhewn stones should be used when making an altar. Basically, the Israelites should use what is lying around rather than plan and fashion an altar. In other words, while we have a church building, they were supposed to be like the Covenanters, out in the fields. Their sacred space was temporary. A rough, plastered altar seems unlikely to last forever. Indeed we know that as the cult was centralised on the temple in Jerusalem, no other altars were supposed to be used. The Israelites did not fashion a permanent place of worship that day but responded to a particular encounter with God; and encounter framed around the problem of sin. The good news of the cairn at Jordan was to stand as a reminder for generations of God's goodness, but this altar is temporary.

So, if you will permit me to read allegorically, sin is temporary. It has its impact, the Israelites feel that most keenly, just as we do with the news we

have had this week. This isn't how the world should be but we are reassured that it is not how the world will be. To those that want a more historical reading, the temporary nature of these altars was to protect the place of the future temple in Jerusalem. I suspect that is part of why unhewn stones are emphasised as the building materials. Yet, even this material, rather than allegorical, reason moves us forward in our discussion of sin. As Christians, we believe even the temple in Jerusalem, which replaced these rustic altars, would be replaced in turn by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, a temple that was torn down but remade in three days. A temple that dwells in darkness and awakes in light. A sacrifice that addresses the problem of sin.

This means that written into our relationship with God is the understanding that life will not always be grand, that sin exists, that injustice will exist. We have not simply been baptised in the Jordan and then all goes well. It is a true relationship, where highs and lows are expected. We may have compassion fatigue, we may have a weight upon our shoulders, but we also know that through Jesus, sin is temporary. We know that at times we will be the ones to create distance by our actions, we might well be Achan. Which is why we do not approach our time together with the assumption that everything is ok between ourselves and God or between one another, but ask that God will repair any damage in our relationships. We know sometimes, we have not wronged anyone, but, like some of the Israelites away to take Ai for a second time, life just doesn't feel particularly certain, it has been shaken up, and we need the support of others to keep going.

And so, like the Israelites, we constantly reaffirm our relationship with God. Recognising that it is not static. Just as the Israelites were read the law in the desert by Moses, in the promised land by Joshua. Just as they were read it again by Josiah when the kings rules Israel (2 Kings 23), and by Ezra as the people returned from exile (Nehemiah 8), we do not labour under the illusion that our relationship with God will simply tick over. We use the mechanisms of lament and confession to reorientate ourselves towards God when sin, personal or structural, rears its head.

The story of Jesus tells us that "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life.

For it was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved.” (John 3:16-17) Whether we are building monuments of joy or of regret, of innocent abandon or cynicism, we are a Christ-centred people. That is the story that shapes us and it is a story for the failures, the lost, and the broken.

Through the example of the Old and New Testament, we affirm God's action within this world, God's desire to be close to his creation, which we see in God's covenant with the Israelites, yet all the more dramatically when God become human for our sake. We acknowledge his rejection of evil in all its forms, a rejection that led to his own death, and yet evil is defeated through that very selflessness in an unending outpouring of his grace, which beckons us to a new creation, safe-guarded by the resurrection of Jesus.

We are not under any illusions that we will be the faultless people of God. And yet by the grace of God, we call ourselves Christ's body. Reconciled to God and to each other, not through our own will, but through the will of the one who loves us beyond measure.

As I close, let us return again to those stones. That altar was temporary. It was erected according to the pastoral need of the situation, rather than as a permanent place of worship. Once the Israelites had come through this experience, it could fade away until circumstance meant that the law needed to be read again. So too, do we recognise the things that are eternal and those that will pass. We are invited to lament and confess the repeated troubles of this life, through Jesus we are given a mechanism for reconciliation and forgiveness. So as damaging and painful as the presence of sin is, it's age will pass, indeed it has been defeated by Jesus. By his resurrection we are beckoned to a present and future recreated by the love of God.

Amen.