

SERMON – 20/10/24
'Distraction'

Joshua 10:1-15

Matthew 6:25-34

“So the sun stood still and the moon stopped.” (Joshua 10:13)

Have you ever wished that the world would just stop for a bit and let you catch up? We all have times when we feel overwhelmed by what is going on around us or within us and we just want to press pause until we can get things straight and be in a position when we can move forward again.

I would like to reflect with you this morning on our readings from the Book of Joshua and from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that both address some of the big questions of life from the perspective of fallible human beings seeking to walk with God. I guess the reason we are all here today is that we are all fallible human beings seeking to walk with God, so I expect that there will be lessons for us to learn here.

Let's begin with the unfolding story of the Book of Joshua. The great man, Moses' successor as leader of the people of Israel, is facing the challenge of his life – the Land that God has long promised to His people lies before them but it is for them to take hold of it in the face of all that stands in their way. No mean feat.

First of all we saw how the Israelites presented themselves before the Lord and waited for His leading. Though the instructions God gave them through Joshua seemed strange, they obeyed them, the whole people marching silently round Jericho once each day for six days and then seven times on the seventh day before offering a blast of the ram's horn and a great shout to the Lord and watching as the walls of the city simply collapsed without any of the Israelites lifting so much as a finger.

In sharp contrast, with the much lesser city of Ai before them, the people and the leaders acted on their own, without so much as a word of prayer, and they were soundly routed and sent away with their tails between their legs. Only when they turned again to the

Lord for guidance were they victorious over Ai and ready again to humble themselves before the Lord to renew their covenant with Him.

Of course all of us have experienced similar highs and lows in our walk with God, and I can confidently predict that most of us will not have been terribly good at learning the lessons of past experience.

Last week we saw how, yet again, a failure to live prayerfully and a failure to depend on God opened Joshua and the elders and the people to the deception of the Gibeonites who persuaded them that they were a people from far off who had come to make a treaty with God's people out of reverence to the Lord, but who in actual fact were one of the Canaanite tribes from just up the road with whom they had specifically been forbidden from making any treaties. I said last week that we would see one of the consequences of making that treaty in this morning's passage, and that takes us to the first of the points of reflection I would like to lay before you today.

The Israelites were supposed to have been single-mindedly pressing on to take hold of the Promised Land, but the result of their treaty with the Gibeonites was that all the neighbouring tribes were alarmed enough to make a grand alliance against Israel and Gibeon and we read here that the five kings of the Amorites – the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon – joined forces and launched an assault on Gibeon, forcing Joshua to honour the treaty and come to their assistance in a much bigger battle than they would have had to fight if they had been left to take each city one by one.

The outcome of the treaty with the Gibeonites was that the people of God had been distracted from their primary mission and caught up in a much more complicated situation than they ought to have been. When the messengers come from Gibeon to ask Joshua to come and save them, you can imagine Joshua throwing his hands in the air and crying out that he didn't have time for this. Stop the world, I want to get off. Whatever strategy for the conquest of the land that Joshua had been planning had to be put on hold and we are told that the entire army, the best fighting

men, was marched all night from Gilgal to Gibeon. Not at all what Joshua had hoped they would be doing. What a distraction!

Jesus puts it so powerfully in the Sermon on the Mount when He calls us not to get distracted with worries about food or clothes (or whatever it may be that keeps any of us awake at night). "Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to their life (or a single inch to their height)," He says. (Matthew 6:27) You will not add an hour to your lifespan or an inch to your height by worry – in fact, worrying is more likely to shorten your life and make you stoop with the burden you carry. No, says Jesus, don't get distracted. That's the first thing.

And the second thing is to get focussed. "Seek first God's Kingdom and His righteousness, Jesus goes on, and all these other things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33) And that seems to be what Joshua does, learning the lessons of the disaster at Ai and the deception of the Gibeonites by taking time to seek God's guidance. Now, we are not privy to what Joshua actually *asks* the Lord nor the detail of what God directs him to do, but there has clearly been a prayerful conversation because we *are* told the message that Joshua was to share with the people as a result of his encounter with the Lord: "Do not be afraid of them [the Amorites]; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you." (v.8)

Perhaps it's as well, actually, that we are not given any detail of the conversation Joshua had with God in prayer because then we might be tempted just to try and copy what he said when what is needed is for us to be entirely ourselves and have the particular conversation we each need to have with the Lord. Seeking first God's Kingdom can never be a mechanical thing and there are no push button prayers we can simply activate to accomplish our desired outcome. It's about developing a living relationship with God in which you learn to discern His will as you learn to ask the right questions in whatever particular circumstances you may find yourself. If you feel overwhelmed and you just want the world to stop to give you time to catch up, or if you have got distracted from what you are meant to be doing and you want to get back on track again, just find a quiet spot, close the door and start the conversation with God. It's entirely between you and Him and

there is absolutely no script. It has to be honest and it has to be open. Just talk and just listen – don't worry, put distractions to the side and seek first God's Kingdom and, Jesus says, everything else *will* fall into place.

Going back to Joshua and the Israelites, the quick response and the all-night march took the Amorites completely by surprise and it wasn't long before the enemy was on the run. The danger, however, was that they would all find a way back to their various fortified cities and batten down the hatches, so it was imperative that the Israelites pressed home the advantage while they could. As we saw, God had assured Joshua that the enemy would be given into their hands and they held on to that promise as they sought guidance for the way to accomplish victory.

Spurred on by the extraordinary events, Joshua is emboldened in his praying. We read: "On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: 'Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.'" (v.12) That's some prayer! And however it may have happened physically speaking, we are told that time somehow stood still until the Israelites were able to complete the victory. Astronomers have calculated that there was an annular eclipse of the sun visible in Canaan on the 30th October 1207 BC right around this time in history, which might have been described as the sun and the moon stopping in the sky, but whether or not that was the physical explanation for what happened, the fact of the matter is that Joshua's bold prayer was answered and what could so easily have been another truly disastrous day for the people of God turned out to be one of unparalleled success.

So what are you going to do this week on your faith journey? Don't be like Joshua and the Israelites and let distractions derail you from fulfilling God's purpose for you. Catch hold of yourself like Joshua did and enter into a meaningful conversation with God in prayer – seek first God's Kingdom and be bold in what you ask for as you are led in that conversation. Ask great things of God and expect great things of God, because even those things that seem impossible for us are possible with God. And let's just see what God will do in us and through us this week and in the weeks to come.

In the economy of God the normal rules don't apply. Even the sun and moon can stand still in the sky or the earth stop turning on its axis. The tasks that seem impossible to accomplish in the time available *can* be completed if you are bold enough to ask God's help.

Jesus said, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. And why do you worry about clothes? Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."