

SERMON – 17/11/24
'Sanctuary'

Joshua 20:1-9

The Lord said to Joshua: "Choose the cities of refuge that I had Moses tell you about. If any of you accidentally kills someone, you can go there and escape the one who is looking for revenge. You can run away to one of these cities, go to the place of judgement at the entrance to the city, and explain to the leaders what happened. Then they will let you into the city and give you a place to live in, so that you can stay there. If the one looking for revenge follows you there, the people of the city must not hand you over to that one. They must protect you because you killed the person accidentally and not out of anger. You may stay in the city until you have received a public trial." (Joshua 20:2-6)

We are drawing towards the close of the Book of Joshua which we have been reading together since the end of August. It's not been an easy read, perhaps because the unfolding story of slaughter and destruction seems far too similar to what we are witnessing at the moment in Lebanon and Israel and Palestine despite the fact that Christ has shown us a very different way to live. But I hope that we have been able to learn some lessons for our own way of life in the spiritual realm where we face opposition to the establishment of God's Kingdom within us and among us as Christians.

This morning we have read a short passage that may strike us as a little odd – the establishment of what are called 'cities of refuge' which were to be places of sanctuary for someone if they had accidentally caused a death and were fleeing from those who might want to take justice into their own hands and exact revenge if it was a member of their family who had died. The example that is given by Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy is this: A person has gone into a forest with a neighbour to cut wood but as he swings the axe to fell a tree, the head flies off and hits the neighbour and the poor man is killed. It's an accident of course – it's not murder – but if the person goes back home and explains what has happened they may not be believed.

The family of the person who has died may decide to take a life for a life and ask questions later.

These cities of refuge were to be among the cities scattered throughout the Promised Land as the inheritance of the tribe of Levi. The Levites were not like the other tribes with an inheritance of *land* on which to grow crops and raise animals – they were only given *towns* to live in, not land. As the priestly tribe, the Lord Himself was their inheritance and while they were to devote themselves to serving the Lord in the offering of sacrifices on behalf of the rest of the people, the other tribes were to supply their material needs, rather in the way that the offerings of a Christian congregation today allow for ministers to be released from the need to earn a living to offer spiritual support to the church.

So what about these three Levitical cities east of the Jordan and three to the west that were to be cities of refuge? What is their significance for our times? I want to highlight two things briefly this morning – one is justice and one is salvation.

Firstly justice. Something that is an huge problem in our time is the kind of injustice that has always been around but which is made many times worse by the instant mass communication that the internet has made possible. If I use the phrase Trial by Media you will probably know what I mean. How often does an exposé in a newspaper or by an investigative journalist on television bring down a public figure. Allegations are made and evidence is put into the public domain and everyone instantly makes up their mind as to whether the person whose words or actions have been exposed is guilty or innocent. Newspapers and television companies of course employ lawyers to advise on what they can and cannot say, but the rise of social media has led to the kind of free-for-all that once would have been in the realm of village tittle tattle but which now can be twice round the entire world before you can blink. And whether or not an allegation is true or false millions of people will have formed an opinion. Now we may not be dealing with murder or the death penalty here but injustice can sometimes be a matter of literal life and death.

What is provided for in the Old Testament is that all should have a right to sanctuary – a place of refuge – until due process is complete, where innocence is presumed until guilt is proven. Of course if someone *is* subsequently found guilty of a crime they have denied committing they should face the full force of the law and equally if someone is found to have brought a false or a misleading accusation they too should face the harshest of penalties.

The significant thing to notice here in the Book of Joshua is that at the very foundation of God's Kingdom on earth there is a profound commitment to ensuring that justice is done (and is seen to be done) and a conscious effort to make justice available to all wherever they may live in the land. And it seems to me that as the people of God today we should be similarly committed to the establishment of justice however great or small the accusation that is made, whether it's in the life of the church, whether it's being played out on the community Facebook page or in the columns of the national press or whether it is on the streets of Kyiv or Gaza.

And the place we each need to begin is with ourselves. Before we dare to criticise others either for what they are accused of or for the allegations they are making against others, we need to acknowledge that to one degree or another we are people who sometimes accuse others falsely and we are people who are sometimes falsely accused; we are people who get sucked in to taking revenge and escalating disputes, and we are people who try to avoid the consequences of our actions by protesting our innocence even when we get it wrong. It's not just in the public arena that space and sanctuary needs to be given to take the heat out of the bad things that sometimes happen. We need to do the same in our family squabbles and neighbourhood fall-outs. We need to give time and space for tempers to cool and the opportunity for someone from outwith the situation to weigh up the facts of the matter and bring things to a proper conclusion.

If the Old Testament often has things to teach us about the way we should order our world today, it also always points us to Jesus Christ, and it is in Him that we find the fulfilment of what we have read about in Joshua this morning.

God sent His Son Jesus into our world to be our refuge. Just as a city of refuge in Israel was never more than a day's journey for someone who was fleeing from a person intent on vengeance, so Christ is very near, just a prayer away from those in need. Just as the cities of refuge were for all people, children of Israel or foreigners in their midst, so Christ is for all people – Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor, saint and sinner.

Rather puzzlingly the regulations for the cities of refuge provided for the person seeking sanctuary there to return home in safety upon the death of the high priest. But that provision makes sense in the context of the death at Calvary of our great High Priest Jesus Christ our Saviour, for it is in Him that we not only find perfect refuge but full salvation, the forgiveness of all our sins and the way to our eternal home.

Whatever circumstances you find yourself in this morning, whether you are outraged by the injustices that are perpetrated in our world or whether you stand accused (rightly or wrongly) and fearful of the consequences that might be coming your way, draw near to Christ and find Him to be your refuge and strength.

In words that we sometimes sing:

'When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there who made an end to all my sin
Because the sinless Saviour died my sinful soul is counted free
For God the Just is satisfied to look on Him and pardon me.'