

Our faults become a means of Grace

27th August 2017

Judges 6:33-40 plus 7:9-11 and 13-15 / John 14:15-24

A little girl asked her Mum one day, "how and where did humans come from"?

Her Mum answered with the story from Genesis – "God made Adam and Eve, they had children and grandchildren and the whole human race came about".

A couple of days later the little girl asked her Father the same question – "Dad, where did the human race come from"? Her Father answered that "millions of years ago there were monkeys and humans developed from them."

So the little girl went back to her Mum and said, "you told me the human race was made by God and Dad says we came from Monkeys – I'm confused."

"Well", said Mum, "I was talking about my side of the family and your father was talking about his..."

We all come from somewhere and all of us have a story. Quite how much that old story shapes and influences us is a question we shall explore today, because in part, old stories shaped Gideon's life.

Last week we began exploring the story of Gideon from the book of Judges. If you want to read the whole saga it's chapter 6,7 and 8. We shall continue today and for two more weeks.

Last week we had the Israelite nation turning away from God – Again!

I spoke about Gideon's father Joash and how his character, shapes Gideon.

Finally we met Gideon who is angry and afraid but nevertheless is commissioned by the angel of the Lord to go and deliver the whole nation from the Midianites.

My challenge last week was a call to holiness. We are called, like Gideon, to serve, and we may be uncertain or afraid, but our primary responsibility is to be holy – and of course this can only be achieved through the merits of Jesus Christ – his death and resurrection.

This week our story develops. The story teller who wrote this for us is enjoying telling the story. The Midianite hoard are camped in the land. The enemy lie on the land as thick as locusts, and there are more camels than you can shake a stick at and we work out later there were about 135,000 of them.

Gideon's moment has arrived and God does not break his promise to be with him. Filled with the spirit he sounds the trumpet and calls out all his personal extended family and they come. He sends the word through Manasseh, and they come. He sends messengers to the tribe of Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali – and they come – Gideon has an army – but he doesn't call out neighbours Ephraim and that is part of an old story.

When the Angel of the Lord first met Gideon one of Gideon's excuses for not being able to do anything was "I'm from the tribe of Manasseh". So what?

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Why being from Manasseh is relevant begins generations before and is in Genesis chapter 46 and here's the really short version...

Jacob – the one who had 12 sons so that Andrew Lloyd Webber could write musicals about it. He had a favourite son who was????

Joseph – the one with the jazzy coat

In a class above the rest

It even went well with his vest

Such a stunning coat of many colours

How he loved his coat of many colours

Of course Joseph ended up running Egypt. He had two sons. Manasseh was the eldest, Ephraim the youngest. Now Jacob is not long for this world and getting the blessing of the patriarch was a really big deal – you may remember Jacob pinched his brothers blessing. (Another old story)

Joseph ushers his boys in – Manasseh the eldest towards Jacobs RIGHT hand, (it's the right hand that matters) Ephraim the younger to Jacob's left. What does Jacob do??? Swaps his hands over and blesses Ephraim.

From then on there was a spiritual pecking order – Ephraim was the blessed tribe, Manasseh the "other" tribe. That sense of being second class, worth-less, less than another filtered all the way down to Joash and then to Gideon. (*I'm only from Manasseh*).

Where you are from, what your cultural identity is, can have an impact on how you live and the decisions you make and the person you regard yourself to be. Closer to home old stories can continue to influence throughout our lives.

I knew a guy called Gerald who was a close friend of my Dad. He was a lovely man, he is now with the Lord. He was a twin and his mother favoured his brother. She would say "you'll never be as good as...why cant you be like...." and Gerald never quite shook it off. Even as a successful, competent, wonderful gentleman and good friend to my Father, he was still tripped up from time to time with a sense of inadequacy. Old stories can entrap us.

I few years ago on my sabbatical I finally had the time and space to deal with issues I had successfully ignored up until then. One was a tendency to hypochondria, a real anxiety about my health in some aspect or other which occurred when I was feeling stressed.

One of the things that helped was a conversation with my older sister (the middle one of the three of us) who was exactly the same. She had come to the same conclusions as to the origin of this. So I tried it out on my other sister – the eldest of us, and she was the same.

Worrying about health was something our Dad did throughout our lives. In fact worrying was something he did to an Olympic level.

But then, his father had been killed in the war when Dad was 13, later on his house had been bombed and they had to move to relatives in another town. His Mother died when he was 21 and the deep underlying anxiety that something bad was going to happen was confirmed when my parents had a still born child. He was never able to shake off being a worrier – you can understand why.

Without realizing it my sisters and I learned to worry and like Dad, feel anxious about health. Learning this truth

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was the start of the journey of being set free from old stories.

In His very great love for us, God leads us to the place we are most vulnerable and most afraid in order to bring us healing and wholeness.

In doing so we discover that our weakness is made strong by God's strength and there is no finer example than Gideon. What a contrast between Gideon as we know him – scared of his own shadow, and a Gideon no-one has ever seen before. The difference is the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 6 verse 13 says in my NIV bible - Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Gideon. In the church NRSV's it says But the Spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon. I'm not sure either get it quite right.

In his book on Gideon, Jeff Lucas says this.

The Hebrew seems to suggest an unusual experience. It's as if God clothes Himself in Gideon. This is not Gideon clothing himself with God, but God clothing himself in Gideon, going deep within Him and filling the very centre of who he was with the Spirit.

At this moment – Gideon is 100% pure Gideon the way God always intended him to be. Because God fills Gideon with His Spirit, Gideon is set free to be completely himself. Gideon will take decisions, Gideon will lead the army Gideon will triumph, because God empowers him to be himself.

What was this new and improved Gideon like???

Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!

No! Gideon is not transformed into Superman. He doesn't do anything beyond what mortals can do, quite simply at those moments filled with the Spirit, he is complete.

But he's still human in every way and in this story his old nervousness and anxiety return and we have the famous story of the fleece (please note – it's not a golden fleece – that's Jason and the Argonauts)

He asks God for a sign and he gets the sign he has asked for...but he starts worrying that the sign he asked for is just a normal thing that always happens. So he asks for the sign the other way round and he gets that too. What does that tell us about Father God? Doesn't it demonstrate his patience, his kindness, his understanding of our frailties??

I don't know whether you keep a journal or not, a prayer journal between you and God. Looking back through mine I realize how many times I've asked God for the same things. Has HE got bored with my endless requests? Not at all, His infinite love and patience is drawing me towards wholeness and healing.

My evidence from scripture is that God, knowing what Gideon is like, doesn't wait for Gideon to ask for a further sign or further encouragement he sends Gideon down to the enemy camp and the dream he overhears convinces him that victory is assured.

We all have a story.
The church has a story.

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I would be astonished if our lives together as God's people were not in some way shaped by old stories.

Often our stories can leave us afraid, nervous, withdrawn, uncertain. There's a bit of Gideon in most people. Or we might be angry and demanding and controversial. Yet God gives us a monumental challenge which is likely to expose all these stories, show up our weaknesses and leave us feeling vulnerable.

He tells us to – love one another.

³⁴ 'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' John 13

Loving each other is the biggest challenge we have. It's not money. It's not buildings. It's not services. It's not a cunning strategy to grow by 5% every year for 10 years.

It's to love each other. Because quite often, we don't love ourselves very much. And if we don't love ourselves and the weaknesses we hide away, how can we love each other?

I remember on a course once being told that we have to go cautiously, so as not to bump into each other's inner furniture. Some of us have got more inner furniture than an IKEA warehouse – perhaps that's why I feel at home there.

But there is good news. Our weakness is made perfect in God's strength as we saw in Gideon.

In 2 Corinthians 12 we read of the Apostle Paul who had a troubling issue – he called it his thorn in the flesh. He prayed earnestly for God to remove this, in verse 9 it says

But God said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

I sincerely believe that it's only when we encounter Jesus Christ that we can begin the long and winding road to becoming whole, healed and truly ourselves. In His love for us God will deliberately make that long and winding road go to the places of our weakness, our suffering and failure, in order to heal and restore. How much more should we be gentle with one another!!

When we first encountered Gideon he was angry that the miracles God used to do were conspicuous by their absence. Now there is a relationship between God and Gideon and He experiences times of completeness due to God's spirit and God's mercy and gentleness when his old anxiety returns.

What about you? I wonder if you can allow your faults and weaknesses to become a means of grace and blessing? Perhaps like Gideon you will respond with trembling obedience and discover healing on the way.

Like Gideon we have a sign that God is for us, a demonstration of His love and compassion – it's not a fleece on the ground, but bread and wine reminding us of the length God has gone to, to win our souls.