

## Lent 2022 - Title: *Far from Silent: Women through Scripture (St Giles Lent 2022)*

### Talk

Hello, and welcome to St Giles' Lent Talks this year. Our series is entitled "Far From Silent": Women in Holy Week and Easter.

Named women making up only 5.5 to 8 percent of all named characters in the Bible. They aren't generally in the forefront of public life in the Bible – or many of our sources for ancient history. This means that the women who are named are done so for reasons outside the ordinary. In the Bible this is often for reversal – meaning they are often involved in the overturning of human power structures in favour of new ones. . The founding matriarchs are mentioned by name, as are some prophetesses, judges, heroines, and queens, while the common woman is largely, though not completely, unseen. The slave Hagar's story is told, and the prostitute Rahab's story is also told, among a few others. The New Testament refers to a number of women in Jesus' inner circle, and Jesus generally deals with women with respect. The New Testament also names women in positions of leadership in the early church as well. Views of women in the Bible have changed throughout history and those changes are reflected in art and culture – we'll see that over our series.

Over the next few minutes, I want to introduce some women from the Old Testament and their stories, backgrounds, and offer some questions and thoughts about how their experience will apply to us today. Rev's Natalie, Sue and Helen will look at Mary Salome, Mary Magdalene and over the next 3 weeks – and I am very thankful for their time and thoughts for these talks.

We hope you enjoy the talks, that it inspires you to look into the stories of these women a little more in their day, and that the questions posed will encourage us all in our walk with God throughout this Lent.

I'll be discussing 3 women from Scripture today – Deborah, Jael and Ruth.

The book of Judges is one of those that barely gets a look in in most lectionaries. It belongs in the "histories" category of Bible books, but if you want a little overview in a helpful form – type Bible Project Judges overview into google or Youtube and watch that little 7 minute video.

A great book (that Poppy put me on to as it is her Lent book) is *40 women: unseen women of the Bible from Eden to Easter* by Ros Clarke – and I've used some commentaries on Judges to prepare if anyone wants to borrow them from me.

### Deborah – Judges

Deborah is a prophet – one in a long line of Israelite tradition. She is very well known, and receives visitors under the shade of her palm tree, described in Judges 4. 1-15.

The land is in turmoil, as per usual. Everyone is going their own way and doing their own thing. Not that that's a bad thing but there is no interest in consensus, or building for anyone less fortunate. People are looking out for number one and seeking to hang everyone else. Deborah does a roaring trade in sorting out disputes – Ros Clarke writes 'plenty of God's wisdom needed and doubtless plenty of it ignored'.

The local power in the Middle East at that time was the Canaanites. Jabin, their king was a cruel ruler, and his general, Sisera kept Israel firmly under thumb despite their initial military successes in the preceding decades under Moses and Joshua into their promised land. The Canaanites aren't keen on it being taken.

Deborah knows the pattern, as we all do. What goes up, must come down. Empires rise and fall. Growth is never exponential, however much we wish it to be.

For the fledgling nation of Israel, this came in the form of return and relapse with their covenant promises to God. They stray, wickedness and oppression occur, then the Israelites remember and cry out to help. Help, in this time comes in the form of a judge.

Don't be thinking a gavel, hat, and a wig. We often think a judge, judges – i.e. hands out punishments in accordance with a pre-written set of laws, although they may be held in high renown to decide in disputes; but the biblical idea of Judges is someone that will lead a people to victory against what is harming them. It means to decide and discern the truth of something and work out a solution. More like a mediator in a hostage situation!

Deborah looked around for an answer to Israel's plight. She shows wisdom, doesn't jump in immediately, but weighs it up.

As it turns out in Bible reference, Barak isn't that confident. Ros Clarke says cowardly. He says to Deborah "If you go with me, I will go, but if you don't, I won't". We'll come back to that phrase with Ruth.

You know that saying about behind every great man, there is a great woman? Deborah calls Barak out on the cause of his weakness. She essentially says, in Judges 4:9, "Fine, I will go. But the credit will go to a woman, for God will save us from Sisera".

In the Old Testament bits of the Bible, it is a sign of something seriously wrong when the fellows don't do their job and women step up to the plate. We're a little more used to that idea in our day and age; but that isn't the problem. Don't get sidetracked by thinking any specific type of masculine values are being advocated. The biblical insinuation here is that the fella's aren't even doing the basics and especially in situations of hardship like this – within the context of their society, they are fearful, lazy, rebellious and cowardly.

So, even if it should have been Barak – who had been chosen and discerned by Deborah – Deborah was more than capable of carrying it out.

Yet, over and over again, despite the best efforts of people and their foibles – God works round them to work his purpose out. The more I read Judges, I'm glad God has patience and forbearance with us – even still today!

Ros Clarke's questions are excellent – and I hope you'll take the time to think them over for yourself based on Deborah's story:

Why are we so slow to recognise when we need God's help and so slow to cry out to him?

How have you responded to God's pull in your life? With faith and courage or with fear and rebellion?

### **Jael - Judges**

The way Sisera, the general of the Canaanite army, is brought down is by Jael. Jael is literally at the sharp end – and is one of the most graphic stories in the entire Bible.

Jael's story reminds us of something that is still true today. The Middle East is a cultural melting pot and always has been. The theological themes running through are also of interest to the modern person. A question, running through the book of Judges is: If all of this stuff is happening, is God even in charge? If so, how on earth or in heaven is he working in this mess?

It is a question that I often come across in my ministry, and each person's answer is unique to them.

Let's talk through one extreme way here – to follow on from Deborah.

That is Jael. We don't know much about her – but she's given full credit for defeating Sisera in the song of Deborah in Judges chapter 5. Scholars date this as one of the oldest bits of the Bible.

This is where we see someone taking a stand against something they perceive as wrong. King Jabin was at peace with the house of Heber the Kenite, Jael's husband (Judges 4: 17). Accordingly, Sisera has a reasonable expectation of being granted hospitality and security from the wife of Heber.

He needed security too. In Judges chapter 4, we are informed that Barak moved his troops against Sisera – and routed them. Sisera hopped off his chariot and fled on foot while Barak mopped up the fleeing Canaanites. He flees to a point of possible safety, to Jael. Jael invited Sisera into her tent, covered him with a blanket. When he asked for some water, she gave him milk. Sisera, taking precautions, asked Jael to stand guard at the tent entrance and fell

asleep. When he had fallen into a deep sleep – Jael picked up a tent peg and hammer and drove it through Sisera’s temple with such force he was pinned to the ground – dead.

When Barak came by, Jael summoned him to see Sisera’s body. Thus Deborah’s prophecy was fulfilled in the most unexpected, and graphic way.

If we take a look at this story - the deed itself is not admirable, although for the Israelites it signals the liberation from military oppression from Jabin and the Canaanites. It violates several of the commandments that God has given to the Israelites; although Jael was not among them.

A theological question for all of us, that is particularly present in Judges, is: How does God’s concern with ordering things to his will relate to his concern with the motives and methods of getting it done?

There are lessons in this tale for those in positions of power here of making assumptions of those who are deemed weak and inconsequential. Don’t assume that they will do what they are told or that they can’t think for themselves. Don’t assume they will react in the way that you would expect – or even think they should or that they are happy to let others speak for them. This sentiment is echoed in 1 Corinthians when St Paul says ‘God chose the weak things of this world to shame the strong’.

And what about for those of us who do feel inadequate? Vulnerable? Afraid? As if nothing we could do could be of consequence to the person next to us, never mind to God.

Ros Clarke writes “don’t assume that the mighty leaders, with all the power, money, stuff will be victorious in the end. They are not invulnerable”. Each action of ours can spin history on a dime. It only takes one act of courage. It only takes you. The tyrant Sisera was brought low by the housewife Jael.

Since then, Jael’s symbols of a hammer and tent peg have become symbols of strength and independent thought. Many portraits in the middle ages of women were painted with these symbols to call her story to mind.

I wonder:

### **Ruth – book of Ruth**

The Book of Ruth has been described as a tale of charm and delight. It is a book of ordinary people in extraordinary times. Some situations are less familiar to us here in Britain today, but nevertheless common in other parts of our world. Indeed, with our rising costs in living, the issue of scarcity that kick-starts the story of the BOOK OF Ruth may be something we become more familiar with.

The book also creates a nice parallel with the Book of Judges. The contrast continues – Judges is about politics, nations, power tensions. The book of Ruth is about the things a little nearer to home – and it homes in on the individuals living within these epics.

It is, perhaps, a little more graspable than the sweeping epic timeline of Judges – like comparing these two books (hold up 2 comparisons of history books).

If that image doesn’t help, think about it like the Lord’s prayer. It opens with the words ‘Our Father, who art in heaven’ – or, all the way up there. The prayer continues ‘give us today our daily bread’ which is us asking God to take heed to the things that will sustain us daily, in our food (daily bread), relationships (forgive us our sins or trespasses), and our hearts (as we forgive those who trespass and lead us not into temptation).

Moabite woman Ruth, who accepts Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, as her God and accepts the Israelite people as her own. In Ruth 1:16–17, Ruth tells Naomi, her Israelite mother-in-law, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. " Remember Barak? It’s the exact opposite of what he said, and it is a courageous decision from this young woman to cast her entire lot in with her mother-in-law. She goes on... “Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

Far removed from the gory actions of Jael's tent; we get an insight into life in Old Testament times. Life is structured around clan and tribal identities rather than nations. They shared resources and animals, and controlled local features such as water unless they could afford to build artificial cisterns to allow for larger settlements.

There is a famine in the land, and Elimelech moves his wife Naomi into Moab. Two Moabite women marry Elimelech's sons; but the 3 men all die and leave Naomi and her now daughter-in-law destitute. Ruth, one of Naomi's daughters-in-law, declares her loyalty to Naomi – despite the hardship with the words that turn Boaz's on their head.

Seeking to provide for Naomi, she goes out to glean in the fields of Boaz. Gleaning was an ancient custom of welfare for the poor, and a good eco-friendly practice too. Farmers would leave a certain area around the edges of their field uncultivated, so that any food grown there could be taken by those who had nothing. It probably helped the local wildlife and eco-systems too.

Boaz happens to notice Ruth, and instructs his workers to be generous to her. Today, we would be unsurprised to hear of exploitation and bad wages; yet Boaz is shown to be upstanding and compassionate in this story. When Naomi hears of Boaz's kindness, she encourages Ruth to go and meet him to ask him if he would become their protector through marriage – and provide them with some security.

Boaz goes to the city to meet with a nearer kinsman of Naomi, who had prior claim on any land that Naomi held, or that Elimelech had left. The law required that a relative buy it and act as conservator until the destitute land-owner could buy it back. This way it kept land in the family and the geographical territory constant. The condition on this land was marrying Ruth to provide an heir to care for the land in the future. The kinsman did not wish to do this – he risked losing his family name to the deceased Elimelech.

In the sight of witnesses, he secures the land of Naomi and the hand of Ruth too. Ruth married Boaz and gave birth to a son, Obed.

It is a lovely tale with a happy ending, yet we can draw some things out.

Naomi, we are told, felt abandoned by God – but God had not abandoned her. There were leaps of faith involved – the unnamed kinsman turned down an opportunity to be generous in favour of his own interests. Boaz took the risk of being faithful and generous to strangers and outsiders, but was richly rewarded.

It goes to show that our everyday actions have consequences that can potentially last a lifetime. One of the prayers that hangs here in the vestry at St Giles is this – and it calls my mind back to the lesson of Ruth – who has courage, loyalty, faithfulness and received the blessing of God for her efforts.

Naomi too was restored in her security and brought back what she had thought lost forever.

Obed, Ruth's son, was the grandfather of King David, and through David's line, Jesus himself.

See you next week for our next talk. It won't be as long as this one, but please catch up with it or come and discuss them in person with us after our Wednesday Eucharist. God bless.

### **Bibliography**

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### **Deborah**

Why are we so slow to recognise when we need God's help and so slow to cry out to him?

How have you responded to God's pull in your life? With faith and courage or with fear and rebellion?

### **Jael**

If all of this stuff is happening, is God even in charge? If so, how on earth or in heaven is he working in this mess?

How does God's concern with ordering things to his will relate to his concern with the motives and methods of getting it done?

### **Ruth**

What situations do you feel powerless in? Which people are you afraid to confront?

The war in Ukraine currently has some parallels to this story of an biblical underdog. How can you respond to help those you may have never met?