

SERMON: 2017/11/05 - BTR

[Invite the children to sit at the front.]

Have you ever experienced “Déjà vu”?
Do you even know what that is?

It’s a very funny feeling.

We call those moments “Déjà vu” when it seems like we’ve done that *exact* thing before, and you say to yourself: “I’m *sure* I already did this!” Or, “I’m *sure* we’ve had this conversation already.” - and you don’t know if you imagined it or not!

It can feel so *real*, so unnerving.
Like you’re a time-traveller, skipping back *and forth* along your own personal history.

Well, today, in our Old Testament reading, the Hebrews (*finally!*) found themselves at the border of Canaan - the Promised Land! A wonderful, fertile, peaceful place of flower-meadows full of buzzing bees, and golden wheat fields, and *big* herds of cattle. *Wow!*
They couldn’t wait to leave the horrid, dry, *boring* desert behind and get on with their new lives.

There was, however, in front of them, a river: “the Jordan.”

Now, it wasn’t a big river: oh no. I’ve seen it! And it isn’t deep either.

And yet when the Hebrews approached it, the waters split apart so that they could walk across to the other side *without getting wet!*

And hang on a minute! Hasn’t that happened before?
Hm. What am I thinking of?

[Wait for the answer.]

Yes! That’s right:
The Red Sea had done the same for them.

Of course, back then, it’d been necessary: there was *no way* the Hebrews could have got across that by themselves.

But the River Jordan wasn’t *nearly* so formidable: it was only a stream! Not even

as wide as the Barren Fork. In some places, you could jump across!

Even in the wet season, which is when this happened [Jos. 3:15], the Jordan wasn't a particularly difficult barrier to invaders, *which is*, to be clear, what the Hebrews were: They had been in Egypt for four hundred years after all. You couldn't really say that this lot were "*from*" Canaan.

So, why do you think that God - by a(n other) miracle - caused the waters to divide themselves as in Egypt?

[Wait for an answer.]

Well, what we hear in the Bible is that God wanted to show the Hebrews a sign that He regarded Joshua, Moses' lieutenant, as the new leader. Something powerful and exciting to grab their attention. Something undeniably special so that everyone would have confidence that Joshua was the right man to lead the invasion of Canaan. And that's what He did: as the priests who were leading the army - and carrying the Ten Commandments - stepped down into the water, *Swoosh!* it fled away upstream! Like a living animal - a fearful deer or a nervous squirrel - the waters of the Jordan "ran" away from the Hebrew soldiers. [Jos. 3:16]

Isn't that amazing?

Let's pray: Lord God, we give you thanks for helping the Hebrews and inspiring us with these stories. Help us to see the signs in our *own* lives of Your love and friendship. In Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask the children to leave.]

What do you make of that? [Pause.]

Of the fact that God *helped* the Hebrews to *invade* Canaan?

That God, the father of Jesus, the 'Prince of Peace' [Is. 9:6], actively *helped* "ferry" the Hebrews' forces - their soldiers - to the other side of the Jordan river so that they could *take* land from people already living in it.

Does that strike you as paradoxical?

As ironic?

As odd?

God 'who so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life' [Jn. 3:16] *assisted* an army of foreigners in "perishing" the Canaanites.

Is that kosher?

Or contradictory?

Because what will follow here in our text - in the chapters to follow, that is - is *a lot* of killing and maiming.

That's how the inhabitants of what *would* become "Israel" were, to use the term we heard, "driven" out.

Not by gentle persuasion.

Not by clever marketing or coupon schemes.

Not by banks foreclosing on their homes.

But by a brutal, "take no prisoners" fight-to-the-death [See, e.g.: Jos. 10:11].

How does that knowledge "sit" with you?

Comfortably?

Or does it raise questions?

Objections, even?

How do you "square the circle"?

Well, there was a man - a theologian, actually, and a church-leader; and a very popular one - in the second century, called Marcion of Sinope.

And he was so appalled by the bloodshed described in the book of *Joshua* that he pretty much gave up on reading the Old Testament altogether.

In his eyes, there was *no way* to reconcile what he encountered there and what he knew of Jesus:

Jesus, after all, was the one who was slaughtered; not the other way round [e.g. Mk. 15:24].

It was Jesus who commanded His followers to turn the other cheek [Mt. 5:39].

And seeing such *seeming*, glaring incongruity between the two "testaments" he discarded the Jewish books; and counselled others to do likewise.

The God of *Joshua*, he argued, wasn't the supreme, loving Creator who was enfleshed as the Christ from Nazareth. No.

He was a malicious, violent *demonic* entity.

A sort of genie.

A malignant sentience that dwelled in the wild deserts and manipulated the Hebrews as they sojourned there, inciting them to do things contrary to holiness.

And this was quite a neat, little way of dealing with the problem.

Especially because Christianity was absolutely spreading like wild-fire among gentiles in the Roman Empire, who viewed the Jews as a rather suspect, secretive, treasonous sect.

And many have been drawn to Marcion-ite arguments.

Myself included (once upon a time).

But Jesus' own attitude towards His tradition was one of *reverence* - of utmost respect.

He saw what He was doing as a validation - a fulfilment - of it.

Not a repudiation.

Not as a renouncement.

His own mission was the *climax* of the mission of the patriarchs and the prophets.

He expressed *no* embarrassment about the manner of His people's "acquisition" of the places in which He lived, preached, healed, died and rose again.

So, why?

What piece of this jigsaw are we missing?

What are we failing to "take into account" about the conquest of Canaan, which might "soften" or even "*transform*" our opinion of it?

And there is, I think, a great deal to discuss; but I want to highlight just a few realities that we may be neglecting in our usual analyses:

One, the Bible is *unambiguous* in accusing the Canaanites of a number of particularly heinous sins, including bestiality and, *most* horrifically, child sacrifice, [see: Lev. 18:21-24 & 20:2-5; 2 Kgs. 3:27 & 23:10.].

And it isn't just that the authors of our Scriptures were spinning some "tall tales" to exonerate Joshua and his warriors, there is a huge amount of archaeology that confirms the latter practice:

[Grab a chalk board. Draw a map of the Mediterranean.]

In North Africa, the Canaanites had some coastal colonies; and there they've unearthed the remains of hundreds if not thousands of young children who were - likely - voluntarily given up by their parents to be drugged and then incinerated one by one inside special ovens carved to resemble their God, "Moloch." [n.1]

In Egypt, "war reliefs" - that's these massive stone tablets that hung in the palaces of the pharaohs, carved to depict scenes of battles - have been discovered with images relating to Egyptian conquests made in Canaan, and in these one can see the limp, plump bodies of babies being tossed to the ground by Canaanite priests from the heights of besieged cities. [Fig.1]

I'd also add that we mustn't forget the role of genre when we read the Holy Scriptures; and in *Joshua* you will come to notice some *very* formulaic, repetitious language - language that suggests that the book isn't a *strictly* historical narrative as we might expect, but a stylised, poetical piece comparable to non-Judaic regional propaganda.[n.2]

Finally, Jesus is the epitome of God's *revealing* of Himself, right?

And that means that anything *before* the incarnation offers only a partial glimpse of the Divine.

Please don't misunderstand me: not an incorrect glimpse. A fractional one.

And what does the conquest reveal? That God can't abide systems or behaviours that are evil, unjust or predatory.

That He is implacably opposed to such things, and desires their destruction. This isn't to say that we are supposed to engage in violence ourselves, however.

The Hebrews were receiving *their* direction from *incontrovertible* Heavenly sources: angels, and fiery-cloudy pillars - and then *additional, public* confirmation from miracles like the completely unnecessary "parting" of the Jordan.

God, in other words, was offering them a special "dispensation" to do as they did.

But God doesn't wasn't us *inactive* in the face of wrong-doing, which is why, in Matthew's gospel this morning, Jesus condemns the 'scribes and the Pharisees': because 'they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger' to help those struggling with life and its "curve-balls" and hardships.

And so He calls on us - as Christians - to be to 'humble [our]selves]' in the service of others: [Mt. 23:1-12].

Let's pray that He melts our hearts of complacency and indifference, amen.

Footnotes:

1. Brown, Shelby (1991), *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in their Mediterranean Context*, Sheffield: JSOT Press. See esp. pp. 13-14, 22, 70 & 172. See also: Jones, C. (2009), 'We Don't Hate Sin So We Don't Understand What Happened to the Canaanites: An Addendum to "Divine Genocide" Arguments', *Philosophia Christi*, Volume 11, No. 1, pp. 53-72.
2. Younger, K. Lawson, Jr. (1990), *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, Sheffield: JSOT Press.

Fig.1:



(From: Spalinger, Anthony J. (February 1978), 'A Canaanite Ritual Found in Egyptian Military Reliefs', *The Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities Journal*, Volume VIII, No. 2, pp. 47-60.)