

SERMON: 2017/11/12 (Sunday Closest to Armistice Day) - BTR

[Invite the children to sit at the front.]

So, Jim used to be a soldier.

Isn't that exciting?

Well, it's also *really* relevant to this morning's Old Testament reading, which was about another soldier: the Hebrew general, Joshua.

Do you remember?

We started talking about him last week; and about how he led the Hebrew army across the Jordan river into a wonderful place called, "the Promised Land."

[Pull out a board with a simplistic pre-drawn map of the Levant.]

Here it is.

Sadly, however, even though God had set it aside for them - as the family of Jacob and Abraham [Gen. 17:8] - there were now lots, and lots, *and lots(!)* of other people living in it [Jos. 3:10]:

*Firstly*, there were the "Canaanites."

[Ask for a volunteer. Put a t-shirt on them with the word 'Canaanites'.]

They lived along the Mediterranean coastline in handsome, fortified cities; and farmed the fertile lowlands.

[Write the word 'Can.' on the map]

*Then*, there were the "Hittites" - a *huge* empire, which stretched from central Turkey into the mountains north of the Sea of Galilee.[n.1]

[Ask for a volunteer. Put a t-shirt on them with the word 'Hittites'. Write the word 'Hit.' on the map.]

After them, were the "Hivites" - but we know nothing about them!

Likewise, the "Perizzites" and the "Girgashites."

[As before with t-shirts.]

The Bible and archaeology, however, has lots more to say about the "Amorites:" They were a very tall [Am. 2:9], fierce people who lived in the (southern) mountains of Judea, [see: Deut. 1:7, 19, 20].

And they had powerful little states all across northern Mesopotamia, in an "arc" - places like [anti-clockwise from north to west] Qatna, Heshbon [Nmb. 21:25], and *Jerusalem* [see: Ezek. 16:3], which is where the "Jebusites" lived.

[Place the remaining t-shirts on some children.]

Now, these seven "kingdoms" were strong, wealthy, confident places; and their warriors had better weapons and access to more-advanced military technology - like chariots; but 'The Book of Joshua' is little more than a list - a succession - of battles during which the apparently inferior, more primitive Hebrews *beat them all(!)* - and beat them badly.

[Have the children line up, and “knock” them down “dead” one-by-one.]

And this outcome - this result - surprises everyone!

It was so *unlikely!*

So *miraculous.*

And this, I think, is our “take-away.” - that when you’ve got God on your side you can achieve heroic, glorious, *unexpected* things.

Let’s pray: Father, we give You thanks for the help that You gave to Joshua and his troops in those ancient battles; and we ask that You would help us triumph over those problems that we face in our own lives, in Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

[As the children to leave.]

With the children just now we were summarizing the *exciting* events of *Joshua*, but what about *these* verses - the last, dense sentences of the book: what’s going on here?

Well, the (great) war (for Canaan) *was* over.

Yes, there were a few “mopping up” “operations” still to be carried out - and we’ll see that happening in the next “chapter” of the Old Testament, *Judges*. But the *major* victories seem to have been won, and so a meeting of the Jewish leaders is called, to “divide the spoils.”

But instead of popping champagne corks and leading his officers in some rousing, boozy singing, Joshua “launches” into a lecture about how the Hebrews must continue to be “on their guard.”

To be on their guard *and vigilant.*

Vigilant against becoming lazy, content and complacent.

Vigilant against becoming smug and comfortable.

*No!* He says.

“Look, this place - this place and the good life that it affords - was hard won. It didn’t come easy, but we got it by being faithful - by aligning - allying - ourselves with Heaven. The prosperity we’re enjoying, therefore, can’t be (indefinitely) relied upon, can’t be *presumed*, but is the consequence of our willingness to live lives pleasing to God, which is to say self-denying lives.

Lives of simplicity and charity.

Lives for “the other.”

Lives of sacrificial service.

Lives not ‘consumed’ by my various appetites, but by a profound mindfulness of the needs of my context.”

Because, after all, we can’t *immunise* or *isolate* ourselves from the world.

Some try.

There have always been Christians who've sought out peace from 'the powers of this dark world' [Eph. 6:12] by hiding in obscure corners; and even today there are groups who have moved their families out to the most remote North American prairies, *hundreds* of miles from their nearest neighbours, in a well-intentioned endeavour to be holy; but the Scriptures - Jesus' example - suggests that holiness is to be found, rather, in what we do for those for whom a peaceful, prosperous existence is proving elusive.

*Which is why* the traditional teaching of the Church *hasn't* been absolute pacifism, but rather calls on Christ-followers to *collaborate* with those in government in the task of maintaining "law n' order."

Extrapolating from Saint Paul's words in *Romans*, chapter 13, Saint Augustine goes as far as to say that 'military duties', when conducted '[o]n behalf of the peace and safety of the community', are not only *not* immoral but actually '*righteous*' [n.2].

And this is obvious when one thinks about it, for whilst it is beyond question that we are losing ground in the face of the advance of "secular humanism," at least the conditions (continue to) prevail for us to challenge it! For there is, let's face it, very little preventing us, my friends, from debating and discussing and evangelising those who question and doubt Faithfulness. No, what we should fear isn't scepticism or Sam Harris or immigrant Muslims, but *anarchy*, chaos.

Just look at Iraq.

*There* Christianity is now almost entirely nonexistent. And yet for *millennia* it survived, enduring first the conquest of Islam and then *brutal* dictatorship.

But the region's *collapse* into rampant terrorism and civil war has wiped it out in just a handful of years.

Those *disciples* who would volunteer to prevent evil of that kind, to keep such things "in check," then, are, says Augustine, 'worthy of singular honour', [n.3].

And yet what about Jesus' command to turn the other cheek?

Well, there can be no doubt that He willed - *and demonstrated!* - for us to renounce violence in (personal) *self*-defence.

And this is a tough teaching.

But if we *truly* believe in a life after this one, and *truly* believe that God's justice and His knowledge of us is unimpeachably perfect, then we need not cling, tooth and nail, to the here and now, but should embrace *whatever* posthumous existence that follows - *especially* if not doing so harms another person, who is

*equally* loved by the Creator as much as me. [Pause.]

You see, “turning the cheek” may be, in fact, *not* about spinelessness, but the reverse: a (subversive) call (by our Savior) to be defiant!

Not in a haughty way.

Not for pride.

But as a way of saying, “Ha! I will not budge: I will be an unmovable bastion of the harmony that God wills for *all* creation; a granite slab of serenity, which shrugs off your sinfulness.” [n.4]

It is not about passivity, therefore.

But about *actively* adopting the LORD’s perspective of the universe, at the centre of which isn’t me, but *everyone* that He loves.

And love doesn’t stand idly by whilst another suffers.

It intervenes!

And, sometimes, punishes. Retaliates, even.

*Just never for selfish reasons!*

But for the sake of those unable to help themselves.

When we’ve arrived at such an awful impasse, of course, is often *very* hard to discern, and requires *real* wisdom - the theme of today’s gospel passage.

And too often the resort to violence is finally taken for mere reasons of expediency - because it is convenient and exciting and “manly;” but Jesus’ death on the cross at Calvary was none of those things, but the exact opposite. And *this* is the example against which we must test every motivation and inclination. Amen.

Let’s reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Mendenhall, George E. (1976), *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition*, Second Edition, London; Baltimore, M. D.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 157.
2. Augustine (1872), ‘Reply to Faustus the Manichæan’, in Dods, Marcus (Ed.), *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo: A New Translation, Volume V: Writings in Connection with the Manichæan Heresy*, translated by Richard Stothert, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, pp. 145-559, 464. (My emphasis.)
3. Augustine (1875), ‘Letter CCXXIX [to Darius]’, translated by J. G. Cunningham, in Dods, Marcus (Ed.), *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*,

*Bishop of Hippo: A New Translation, Volume XIII: The Letters of Saint Augustine*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, pp. 435-437, 436.

4. See: Wink, Walter (1992), 'Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus' Third Way (Matt. 5:38-42 par.)', in Swartley, Willard M. (Ed.), *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, Louisville, K. Y.: Westminster/John Knox Press, pp. 102-125.