

SERMON: 2017/11/19 ("Thanksgiving Sunday") - BTR

[Invite the children to sit at the front. Bring a map of the Middle-East centre-front.]

Do you remember what we were talking about together last week?  
About the soldier, Joshua, general of the Hebrew army?  
And how he liberated a homeland - called "Canaan" - for his people, (who had been wandering around (dejectedly) in the desert)?  
Remember that?

Well, today in our Old Testament reading, which was taken from a (small) book called *Judges*, we've taken a "leap" forward in time: about 160 years.

Joshua had died.  
Peacefully.  
Happy.  
Happy in the thought that he had accomplished God's purpose for his life.

But after his death the Hebrews lost focus.  
They forgot his warning about being vigilant and "finishing the job" of "driving out" the various (wicked) groups who were in the way of God's plan for this region [Nmb. 33:52]. [Indicate the location of the "Promised Land" on a map of the Middle-East.]  
And the twelve tribes that had escaped Egypt became "disunited." [See Jdgs. 2:6]

Do you know what that means?

[Wait for an answer.]

Not only that, but everyone began to look only to their own, immediate, *selfish* needs [See Jdgs. 21:25].

And even when God "raised up" some new strong leaders - men like Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar, the people still didn't listen.  
But meanwhile their enemies - the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Hittites, who were feeling pretty sore from losing all those battles when Joshua was alive - began planning and plotting: they sharpened their swords and mended their shields, and can you guess what happened (next)?

[Wait for an answer.]

Yup.

They hit back! *Hard*.  
*It was a disaster!*

So, the Hebrews 'cried out to the Lord for help' [Jdgs. 4:3], and even though He was really, *really* angry, He felt sorry for them too!  
And He sent them a brave, clever, *wonderful* woman called "Deborah" to organise and lead them to a new (military) victory over the Canaanites.

Let's pray: Father God, we give you thanks that You listen when Your people "cry out." Help us to be more consistent in our devotion to You and Your son, it's in His name we pray, amen.

[Ask the children to leave.]

*Judges* is certainly an exciting read.  
Full of battles and violence and heroics.  
But also full of disappointment and failure.

In fact, this period in Israel's history is a *very* cyclical, repetitious one: the people initially do a great job in carrying out God's desires for their lives and the world around them.

They're full of zeal and enthusiasm - especially when there's a charismatic, *talented* leader to "point the way."

But these "high points" are quickly followed, again and again, by some pathetic, contemptuous descents into mediocrity.

And Joshua warned them!

He warned them to uphold the "covenant" - that pact that they had made with God, to 'revere...and serve Him in sincerity and *faithfulness*' [Jos. 24:14], and thereby be His instrument through which 'all the nations of the earth [would] be blessed' [Gen. 18:18].

Because that's the point of all this - of their liberation from Egypt, which was so *awfully* costly for Him who *is* love itself [1 Jn. 4:8], involving as it did the sacrifice of many young lives [Ex. 12:12]; and now of *this* conquest, hanging in the balance - almost achieved - again by great violence, but not quite fully realised.

It wasn't for them to just now lead *normal* lives.  
To succumb to the twisted mores of the heathens.  
To become oppressors themselves.  
To become gluttons.  
Liars.  
Adulterers.

Moses made that clear in *Deuteronomy*.

Here, I quote (from chapter 9):

'You aren't entering and taking possession of their land because you are... especially virtuous; rather, it is because these nations are wicked - that's why the Lord your God is removing them before you, and because he wishes to establish the promise He made to your ancestors: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' [v. 5 - CEB]

In other words, the people of God - that's the Israelites, the Jews, and those, to use Saint Paul's term, who are 'grafted in[to] their place' by faith in Jesus as the Messiah [Rom. 11:17f.], i.e. you and me: "Christians" - are blessed - given new, 'abundant' lives - abundant both in terms of the here and now (by being members of this fellowship), but also in the sense of longevity, that is, offered an *eternal* existence - *not* for our *own* sake, but rather so that we might help make those places where we find ourselves - our offices and our neighbourhoods - *more* holy, *more* just, *more*...like Eden.

You see, you shouldn't forget that story from *Genesis*: it is the paradigm - the model - against which we should *always* be comparing the status quo, and it was a place of *health*, a place of *wealth*, and a place of *peace* [See: Gen. 2:8-12].

And it was all those things because it was *permeated* by God and by intimacy with Him.

Now, in case it isn't already apparent to you: the 'Book of Judges' can be read as an extended analogy for the Church, with its (various) ups and downs.

And on so many levels.

It is a mirror - *and a challenge*:

Joshua's conquest of Canaan hinged on the commitment of each and every one of the warriors under his command.

It wasn't enough that *he* was tireless and passionate and invested himself fully: By himself he was never going to win against so much opposition [Jos. 3:10].

Although it is kind of fun to imagine it this way.

Our movie culture (almost) revolves around superhero loners - and I'm not just talking about those in the capes and cowls, with the underpants on the outside. Actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone built their careers - film after film - pretending to be one-man armies: recall Rambo III or 'Commando'.

But the transformation that God wants to see in the *real* world needs *all* of us to "step up" and use our (collective) *talents*, and not in "fits" and "spurts" - that dooms us to repeat the pattern we see in *Judges*, but with consistency.

And that is the term I'd like you to "dwell" on this morning - one which is very relevant, of course, to the issue of "pledging."

Am I *consistent* in my devotion to Christ and His cause?

Am I *consistent* in "venturing" out in His name.  
Because that's what He asks for. [Pause.]

And this is what today's parable is about [Mt. 25:14-30]: the servants are given their *master's* property to *enlarge* it; and notice what it is said in the rebuke to the 'lazy' one: "you ought to have invested my money *with the bankers.*" [v.27 - my emphasis.]

Why?!

Certainly not because this would have *guaranteed* a good return: anyone who has even the lightest grasp of finance knows that there's no "sure things" about "playing the market;" but *if* he had tried, at least *then* there would've a possibility of *some* growth. - a possibility that is squashed - eliminated - when the money was merely buried.

No. The message is simple:  
"Just have a go!" says the Lord.  
"For me."

After Joshua's passing, most of the Israelites weren't willing to do that:  
As I indicated to the children, we hear that '[i]n those days..all the people [each did their own (selfish) thing]', rather than working together, *consistently*, to actualise God's vision [See Jdgs. 21:25].

But what will we do?

Let's reflect.