

[Judges 4:1-24](#)

How many of you grew up watching films or TV shows about the Wild West? From John Wayne movies to Bonanza, they were part of the cultural fabric for millions of Americans and Brits.

When I read the book of Judges, I think of the Wild West. Not the dangerous distortions in black and white that we watched where the white people were the goodies and the native Americans were the baddies – I think we now know what a terrible injustice that slant was.

No, I think more of the lawless towns and settlements where violence often started at the saloon and was only settled when a new sheriff sorted things out.

Israel in Judges is a Wild West a bit like that. The judges who arise at this period in her history, like Deborah in this story, are governors who sort out the trouble and restore law and order, and they are a little bit like the sheriffs in the Westerns.

Of course, my analogy breaks down in that the trouble isn't necessarily between locals. Usually, as here, the trouble is with other tribes and nations that God has initially used to discipline his people.

But it all gets out of hand, and God sends a sheriff – a governor, or judge if you will – to put things right. In this story, Deborah is the sheriff.

Firstly, sin still has its consequences as Israel continually oscillates between good and evil.

You might think after last week's episode at the end of Joshua 24 where all Israel renews the covenant with God and promises obedience that all will be well.

However, as the tribes disperse to their allotted regions of the land, it all unravels. Joshua's prediction that they would not serve the Lord is tragically fulfilled – not once, but time and time again.

It becomes a repeating cycle in the book as everyone does what is right in their own eyes, the writer says. (And by the way, does that sound familiar?)

So Judges tells us a discouraging series of the same events with different characters. God's people sin. God sends outsiders to chastise them. The people cry for mercy. God raises up a judge to save them. Rinse and repeat.

That is what happens at the beginning of this episode. It isn't the first time, and it won't be the last. The last major sheriff, Ehud has died. His successor, Shamgar, only gets one line in the story. Ehud has used his left-handedness to defeat Eglon king of Moab. (Don't let anyone tell you the Bible only speaks well of right-handers!)

But whatever victories Ehud and then Shamgar have achieved, Israel does not use that deliverance as a sign to reform her ways. She returns to the same old, same old:

Again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, now that Ehud was dead. (Verse 1)

The consequences are not only that God disciplines his people at the hands of Jabin king of Canaan and Sisera, the commander of his army (verse 2), but that Israel's witness is compromised. She makes no progress in being a light to the nations. She does not keep all the land under the reign of the LORD.

And I have to ask, does that also sound familiar? How many of us keep lapsing into the same sins, feel ourselves solemnly corrected by God, cry out to him for mercy and forgiveness, receive it – and then go back to sinning?

I find it uncomfortably familiar.

If you don't believe me, let me ask you one question. What is your besetting sin?

You can probably answer that can't you? I hazard a guess that something came into your mind almost immediately.

I wonder what we need to do to break the pattern. Do we need to be more ruthless on the excuses we use to justify going back to our old ways? Is it that we know God provides us with a way out when faced with temptation but we choose to look the other way? Do we need to ask ourselves why we find the temptation to sin more alluring than the ways of God's kingdom? Do we need to acknowledge that our compromises – even the secret ones – are holding back the work of the kingdom?

Secondly, a day is coming when God will judge the wicked.

Once again, the selectivity of the Lectionary means its compilers didn't want delicate western ears to hear the whole gruesome story of this chapter. The

Lectionary stops at verse 7, where Deborah tells the hesitant Barak that she will lead Sisera and his troops into his hands.

And of course to us the whole tale is rather horrible. You can bet that the story of Jael hammering the tent peg through Sisera's temple won't make it into any of those nice colourful children's Bibles that we give out at infant baptism.

And our problem is, we live on a children's Bible diet. We need to grapple with the difficult stories. They may not be nicey-nicey for comfortable western Christians.

But there are Christians around the world for whom these stories are hopeful. Go to the places where Christians are persecuted, and they will tell you that Bible stories where oppressors are brought down are good news to them.

We get all hyper-sensitive about the fire and brimstone in the Book of Revelation, but those who are harassed and victimised for their faith will tell you that these stories assure them there is a God of justice and that one day he will right all wrongs. Those who defy him and who refuse to change must face a formidable day of reckoning, according to the Scriptures.

So let's remember when we read a text like this that whatever the Israelites had done to deserve divine correction through the Canaanites, the author of Judges tells us that Sisera

had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years (verse 2).

I am not suggesting that we glorify violence or take pleasure in it, but I am saying that this should redouble our commitment to see justice for those who are oppressed. Since President Xi of China took the time limits off his presidency, the persecution of religious believers under his rule has become worse. You could say it has become a feature of his policies. Should we not pray that God will bring him down for what he has done to Christians and to Uyghur Muslims?

Similarly in Burma, where hard-line Buddhism means that the Rohingya Muslims and many Christians are denied citizenship and thus any say in the country, leaving them vulnerable – should we not also pray that if the Burmese Government will not change, God might remove it from power?

Thirdly, God shows mercy on his sinful people.

I talked in the first point about the repeating cycle of sin, chastisement, and restoration, and so the restoration of God's people begins again in this story. Sisera's army is routed (verses 15-16), Sisera himself is slain (verses 21-22), and finally King Jabin is subdued and destroyed (verses 23-24).

But although the writer doesn't comment on it, what's plain in the culture of the day is the unusual nature of those whom God uses to deliver his people. We have a female governor (or, traditionally, judge) in Deborah – and thus an early argument against those who say the Bible presents leadership as exclusively male.

Barak, the man she commands to lead Israel's army, proves to be not the heroic military commander but one who will only go if Deborah goes with him (verse 8).

Deborah then prophesies that as a result of his weakness, Sisera will be delivered into the hands of a woman (verse 9), a prophecy that is fulfilled by Jael (verses 17-22).

In that culture, who would expect the women to be the heroes and the men to play the bit parts? No-one.

But of course in the long run neither Deborah nor Jael saved Israel, and the human call for a leader is prone to disappointment, just as those in the USA who are cheering the election of Joe Biden to oust Donald Trump will one day find he has feet of clay.

Yet God ultimately shows mercy on his people through an unexpected person. Not a woman, but one born in poverty in Bethlehem who would grow up to show that true leadership looks very different from conventional human expectations.

Our calling is not only to find mercy in Jesus and to be transformed by his Spirit (in opposition to those besetting sins I talked about), but also to bear witness to this unusual and unexpected leader who does everything in an upside-down way.

Mercy and transformation are found in Jesus, and he calls us to show by our words and our deeds