

Judges 2 False gods

Start of service

Who's thirsty?

Now, I have a choice here...

Hold up two glasses – one full of clear sparkling water and ice, the other full of muddy, dirty, germ filled water.

Who would choose the germ filled filthy water, over the clean water? No-one in their right mind, but when we choose to worship false gods in our lives, that is equally foolish and wrong.

Back in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah God declares; "Has a nation ever changed its gods?(Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror, declares the LORD. My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." Jeremiah 2:11-13

So, as we continue our Bible overview today we are going to see the danger and folly of worshipping false gods.

A retired couple were alarmed by the threat of nuclear war, so they undertook a serious study to find the safest place on the globe. They studied and travelled and studied some more. Finally they found THE PLACE. And just before Christmas 1981 they sent their vicar a card from their new home – Port Stanley. Unfortunately by the second of April the following year the Argentinians had invaded sparking the Falklands war.

You see, peace is a nice idea, but hard to come by. Some clever people have worked out that in the last 4000 years there have only been (at best) 286 years of peace despite over 8000 peace treaties being made – and broken.

So of course, knowing how precious peace is, we work hard for it, we do all that we can to achieve it and encourage it. Alfred Nobel's obituary was mistakenly printed in the newspapers whilst he was still alive and when he read it he was so horrified at the thought of being remembered only as the inventor of dynamite and therefore the cause of thousands of deaths that he used his personal fortune to establish the Nobel Peace Prize.

And what is one of the best ways to establish peace? Well, without wanting to sound too obvious, it is to stop killing people and instead decide to merge your cultures. It's what the Vikings did – they would invade, slaughter, steal, burn, pillage etc, then move in, settle down and integrate which is why there aren't any Vikings around anymore, but why a lot of us have Viking genes in our DNA.

And that's the plan God's people adopt as they move into the promised land. There is the initial invasion and then they decide that enough is enough and they can cope with a few other people around and they will just live and let live.

Now, it all sounds very decent and reasonable, but it wasn't what they had agreed with God and by compromising with the nations around them Israel rejects God. When God led them back to the Promised Land he instructed them to make sure that they were the only nation living there – do you remember why? Because God wanted to establish a nation from which the saviour of all humanity could come, a nation who would know God and know how to love him, how to worship him and from which the good news of rescue through the forgiveness of sins could be taken to all nations so that everyone could be drawn into his blessing. How can that happen if the Israelites go the same way as the Vikings?

So in verses 1 and 2 of Judges 2 the angel of the Lord asks God's difficult question to the people he loves; "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this?"

God asks; "Why have you done this? Why have you broken our agreement? I promised never to break it, but you have been quick to be faithless – why?"

You know, sometimes there are binding agreements and if you fail to keep them then it can have serious consequences. Did you hear the story in the press this week about a couple in America? They bought their house outright a few years ago with cash, but then their bank accused them of defaulting on a non-existent mortgage and began proceedings to reposes their home. Well, of course when all the evidence was presented to the court the case was thrown out and the bank ordered to pay the couple about £1500 in legal expenses.

So what did the bank do? It decided to ignore that ruling and not pay. Well, you can't just ignore the courts, the couple were owed money, so what did they do? They took legal action to reposes the bank! A van turned up at the local branch complete with some bailiffs and the legal right to remove chairs, desks and even cash from the cashiers up to the now increased legal costs of nearly £4000. Well, needless to say, at this point, the bank managed to produce a cheque.

Was it fair? Were the couple right to behave like that? "Of course they were!" we all cry. The bank – was legally required to act in a certain way, a requirement which it repeatedly twisted and broke to serve its own ends with scant regard for its customers, they deserved to pay the penalty.

So when God's people break their agreement with God he is quite within his rights to take action against them, in fact, if God didn't act he would be unloving. Let me explain. God has led his people out of slavery in Egypt, he has cared for them in the wilderness, he has led them to the Promised Land and into the Promised Land, he has handed the land over to them defeating the enemies they were unable to, but his people haven't kept their part of the agreement.

They have said to them selves, "Why do we need to do everything God asks? Let's just stop when its convenient for us." But of course surrounded by other peoples with other cultures and other religions they become intrigued, tempted and seduced into worshipping the false gods of these other nations. It is how sin grows; First it is a case of picking and choosing which of God's commands we will follow, then we begin to neglect God, then we actively reject him.

And God's response? Well, let me ask you; What if you knew a husband who had sad but true evidence that his wife was having an affair with another man –

not gossip, or innuendo, but clear and indisputable evidence. And suppose too that you knew the husband had always been loving, caring, tender, attentive, passionate and devoted towards his wife.

What would you think of the husband if his response was, “Well, you win some, you lose some, it’s just the way the cookie crumbles!” I’ll tell you what you would think, you would be convinced that he had never really loved his wife at all, because if he truly loved her then he would be upset, angry and jealous and the Bible tells us that God is jealous (in that good and loving way) towards his people.

So God lovingly disciplines his people, just as a father would a wayward child. Hebrews 12:5-6 in the NT asks us “And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”

Have you ever thought of that? Sometimes we are quick to cry out, “God, why are you doing this to me?” but we can be slow to see that God might just be disciplining us.

So God pronounces his judgement against Israel. Speaking of the foreign nations he says; “Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you.”

The picture here is that if Israel had continued to be faithful then it would have been God who would have done all the hard work anyway, driving out the pagan nations, but now no matter what they do Israel will have to live with the compromise they have created.

And that compromise will turn out to be an irritation to them rather than the easy life because the false gods were going to be a snare – a trap and a route to death.

And this is exactly what we see happening throughout the book of Judges; God's people locked in a cycle of rebellion, repentance, forgiveness and rebellion. I've printed it there for you on the inside of the notice sheets;

First of all Israel worships false gods; the gods belonging to the people left in the Land, then God hands them over to their enemies (this is what it is really like to belong to another people), which means that Israel are in big trouble.

But here is the proof that God is loving in his discipline; he doesn't just punish and punish and punish until his people are crushed, instead he disciplines them so that they will see the error of their ways, then he raises up a leader to save them – a judge.

Now the judges here aren't like the high court judges we might think of, there are no long wigs and red robes, these are godly men and women who lead God's people out of oppression and back to freedom to live and worship their God.

Now that should all be great, but see how addictive sin is; as soon as the judge dies the people lose interest in God. Although God's people should now rejoice in being God's people they quickly return to their idol worship and the cycle begins again.

What it reveals to us is that we have hearts that are naturally inclined to rebel against God. Even when God is blessing us we so quickly run after other gods and that should be a real warning to us in our culture. Remember the two glasses of water at the beginning?

God is the glorious creator God, the God who loves and who disciplines because he is just, righteous and holy, the God who is full of grace and mercy – the one true God, next to him all idols are worthless because they are nothing more than the representations of false Gods.

Now why did the Israelites behave faithlessly? Why do we do it? Well, I believe that verses 7-14 are incredibly important; “The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.”

Those first 3 verses tell us that although Israel were slack in their worship of God, during Joshua’s lifetime the people did, at least, still worship God because they had witnessed “the great things the LORD had done for Israel”.

But verses 10-17 paint a very different picture; “After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.”

Now, what should jump out at you there? Verse 10 – “another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel.”

Now, why do you think that is? Is it that they simply weren't there when God brought them into the promised Land? May be, or do you think that there is some blame to lay at the feet of the parents?

I think that it is both. Why are the children not seeing God at work? Because of the parents' rebellion, but I suspect that this verse is also hinting that the parents had also been slack in telling their children all about God and what he had done for them.

And that is an important lesson for us to learn, no matter what age the children in our care are. You see, I believe that there is always room for improvement in Christian youth and children's work, but a church could have the best children's ministry and the most vibrant youth work imaginable but all it is doing – all it can do is support the work of parents.

Church youth and children's work and even adult services and groups can never replace what you as parents (or carers or godparents) do with your children. Be they 3, or 43 years old, you are the primary teachers of your children about God, it is our God given responsibility.

If you have younger children, are you encouraging them to read the Bible, are you praying with them? Do you talk with them over Sunday lunch about what they did in Children's Church? Do you tell them what you did in adult church? If you have older, or grown up children are you encouraging them to go to church? Are you encouraging them to read the Bible and pray? Do you speak about your faith to them and in front of them? And no matter how old your children are – are you praying for them? And is what goes in your family home different to what goes on in secular homes?

Listen, I'm not suggesting that you go home and burn your entire CD and DVD collection, but are we maintaining a distinct separation from the culture around us? We are called to live in the world and connect with people in the world and lead them to faith in Christ, but we are not called to be so in the world that we are indistinct from the world – that was the slippery slope the Israelites in the book of Judges fell down.

So let me ask you; Are we happy for our 5 year olds to watch 18 certificate films, or listen to music with explicit lyrics, or watch music videos which are very suggestive? Do we sexualise our children with their clothing, their parties, their dancing? Is our language at home different from non-Christian households? Are our viewing habits, the books on our shelves, the computer games and DVDs or downloads the same, or different? Would God approve of what you do and speak of together as a family?

These are the twenty-first century challenges we face to be God's distinctive people – not living in a bubble, but not so absorbed by our godless, idol centred culture that we turn our hearts and our backs on the one true God. Will we stand up and be counted where the Israelites failed? Will we be worthy of the name of God's people? It's a big call and we need help. So, this Pentecost pray that God will send his Holy Spirit to help you, the strengthen you, to equip you, to embolden you, to sanctify you that you might stand firm in the face of false gods and idolatry and bring up the next generation of God's people to not only know about God, but to actually know him as their God.

Let's pray; Heavenly Father,
Thank you for sending your Holy Spirit to guide us and strengthen us. As we seek to do your will, give us humble hearts before you, help us to live lives that honour you, lead us in ways that uphold our friends and families, and help us to be thankful in both our troubles and our victories. Amen.