

Gideon 1 You...yes, You!

Judges 6:1-3, 11-16, 25-27

Luke 1:68-79

A company that wanted to grow and develop appointed a new C.E.O. This new Boss was determined to rid the company of slackers and make a dynamic first impression.

On a tour of the facilities the new Boss noticed a young guy just leaning on the wall in a room full of busy workers and he wanted everyone to know he meant business.

He walked up to the guy and said – “You, how much money do you earn a week?” Unfazed, the young chap looked at the Boss and said, about £300, why?

The Boss took out his wallet, took out £300, gave it to the young chap and shouted, “here’s a weeks pay, get out and don’t come back”

Feeling pretty good about his first firing and making a statement of intent the CEO looked around the shocked room and asked “does anyone know what this slacker actually did here?”

There was silence until someone replied “actually, he’s the guy who delivers our Pizza from Dominoes”.

I can re-assure you that I don’t feel the need to hire, or fire, or find some artificial way of making an impression – the period of time we now enter after Wednesdays jubilant collation service is for me to listen and learn.

With the Wardens and PCC and those who hold responsibility, there is a great opportunity as I get to know you and you get to

know me to reflect and begin to discern what comes first, what can wait, and where we are heading.

The story of Gideon will give us a scripture to guide the early days of this next chapter in the life of Holy Trinity. If my ability to count is correct, I am Vicar number 14 – so we are at the start of chapter 14 of the developing story of Holy Trinity Sunningdale.

Gideon is an angry young man. At best he’s irritated, on a bad day he’s full on angry because he’s heard the stories of what God has done for the people of Israel in the past, but there is no evidence of it now.

How frustrating to hear again the story of the plagues God showered on the Egyptians, how the Red Sea was parted, how Moses struck the rock and water flowed out. How likely are you to believe any of that when the Israelites are suffering every year as the neighbouring Midianites come and steal, rape, pillage and murder their way through the promised land. Where is this great God now?

We are going to examine the story in detail over four weeks and there are two background aspects on this first Sunday worth appreciating.

I might add – I’m always happy to hear and discuss your thoughts and opinions on scripture. The books I read and consult often differ in their interpretation and we also might have different opinions from each other – the more we explore, and share together, the more we learn.

The first aspect to take in from this story is the way the nation of Israel repeatedly turned away from God to begin worshipping the Baal’s (the local pagan God).

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It's described in a theologically simplistic way – Judges chapter 6 verse 1. *Again the Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.*

I think the reality is that when the people turned from God to the sinful worship of the Baals they lost identity as God's people, they lost cohesiveness, they became ineffective as a nation and consequently vulnerable. God allowed the consequence of their evil to take place...they were vulnerable to attack from the Midianites. There's a simple warning for the church – if we take our eye off the ball, we lose. Let us keep the heartfelt worship of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit at the centre – nothing else.

But have you ever wondered why the Israelites kept on returning to the evil worship of Baal as each new generation came along?

No sooner had there been a rescue from their enemies by one of the Judges, the next generation or the one after that turned again to the worship of Baal. The reason is very simple – it's sex.

Do any of you remember the adverts on TV many years ago for Martini? Do you remember the musical strapline?

*Any time, Any Place, Any where
There a wonderful world you can share
It's the right one, it's the bright one
That's Martini!*

Well – any time, any place, anywhere, pretty much summed up the Canaanite attitude to sex as part of their religious worship. The worship of Baal (at one level) was very very similar to the worship practices of the Israelites themselves. They sacrificed animals, they had rituals, they had festivals. If you weren't

particularly religious or discerning you probably wouldn't know the difference. But the big attraction of Baal worship.... was sex. There were temple prostitutes, and sexual activity of just about every variety was considered part of authentic worship. To re-assure you – I will not be suggesting anything like that as a strategy for church growth!!!

It's easy to see how a new generation would so easily be tempted into Baal worship.

This is the world of young Gideon and to make matters worse, the local Baal altar belongs to his father, and this is the second aspect to understand.

We all have a background. We come from somewhere and for good or ill we are influenced by family and upbringing.

Gideon's father Joash is a survivor. I don't think he's so utterly committed to Baal as all that, but it's what others do and seem to want. He's found a way to hide his food, his cattle, his goats from the Midianites. Although two of his older sons have been killed by Midianites, nevertheless Joash can sway in the breeze and find a way to survive. So when Gideon starts up again about the God who rescues, the God who does miracles, the God who can save, I think Joash will just appease Gideon but do nothing. What he does best, is survive. He reminds Gideon that there's nothing the tribe of Manasseh can do, and nothing their family can do – what they do best is to find a way of surviving.

So this is the world in which we first meet Gideon. His nation have lost identity and loyalty to God. Annual raids from the Midianites are a brutal threat. Gideon's father is a survivor, not a man of faith, principle or action.

To make matters worse, Gideon's personality is uncertain, afraid and anxious. He is the last person the appointment committee

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would turn to be a national leader...in fact Gideon wouldn't have put in an application in, in the first place.

To this scared, angry, frustrated young man, God sends his messenger.

*The Lord is with you mighty warrior.
Go in the strength you have and save Israel, am I not sending you?
I will be with you and you will strike down all the Midianites together.*

Gideon's reply shows his frustration that God hasn't intervened and that he doesn't know who it is speaking to him. It also reveals his personal identity crisis. **You cannot possibly be asking me.**

I love this scene and scenes like it in the bible and I love seeing this kind of scene acted out in the lives of God's people.

God calls all of us to serve him and our response can often be like Gideon – who me? I can't possibly do that. But God calls Gideon by a name 'mighty warrior' and he doesn't yet know that he is – he really is.

The idea that someone is more than they think they are finds its way into all manner of books and films. The young Harry Potter does not know he is a wizard, the young Luke Skywalker does not know his father is Darth Vader or his sister is Princess Leia – or, he's a Jedi knight!

Do you know yourself as God knows you?

Gideon is afraid and in his defence he has good reason to be – his older brothers have been killed. But he's anxious and afraid by nature, uncertain about God's promises and frightened of the

Midianites – and fair enough, there are 135,000 of them. There's nothing he has done or said that would cause anyone to call him "mighty warrior". But God does.

I wonder what God calls each of you?

On Wednesday evening Bishop Andrew asked me this question.

"Will you commit yourself to the mission and ministry of the people in this place to further the kingdom of God"?

I answered, "with the help of God, I will".

I'm called to serve you as **you** fulfil the mission and ministry of Christian people and we grow together as the body of Christ.

I've heard how different church members have stepped up and taken on roles they didn't have before – so perhaps you resonate with young Gideon, being asked to do something new and maybe a bit scary.

There will be those who like Gideon are distinctly nervous about being asked to do something in or through the church or elsewhere that's distinctly Christian. Like Gideon you may have reasons why it cannot be you.

- I've not been a Christian very long.
- I haven't the training.
- I've not done these things before.
- There are others better qualified.
- It's not the right time for me at the moment....

Nevertheless God calls us by a name we don't think we can inhabit – Minister, Lay preacher, youth worker, steward, intercessor – and those are just roles connected to church.

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God is calling every single person to be part of the adventure, to fulfil a calling to serve.

And it doesn't matter if you have responded to God and are involved as clearly many are – because God doesn't tick you off the list and leave you be – there's always the next somewhat scary challenge.

I was really quite comfortable as an incumbent when I also became part-time chaplain at my neighbouring Academy. I took communion services each half term for 2,400 students a year group at a time. I think it would be easier to face the Midianite hoard than year 9 – But God added 'chaplain' to my calling.

God is always surprising us with something more challenging than the last thing – whether we are new to this or have long experience.

Mature Christians may well resonate with these words from George Macdonald.

Everything He gives you to do
You must do as well as ever you can

This is the best possible preparation
For what He may want you to do next.

Gideon has been surprisingly called to be a mighty warrior and defeat the Midianite hoard – (who were probably just a year 9 group on a school trip).

If you were directing Gideon, what would you suggest first?

- Draw up a blueprint for defeating enemies?
- Recruit and train an army?
- Find better ways of hiding the people and food?

What came next I interpret as a call to be Holy.

Although frightened and acting at night, Gideon obeys God and tears down his father's Baal altar building a proper altar to God and offering a true worship sacrifice.

God calls us by name and calls us by titles we may not recognise to serve Him and to build His kingdom. Let us emulate Gideon and be open to God's call but also willing to rid ourselves of anything that is not of God – because he calls us first and foremost to be Holy.

The oath he swore to our father Abraham:
⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.