

Pride comes before a fall
Judges 7:1-8a + 16-22
John 14:8-14

Three, big burly blokes in black leathers pull up on huge motorbikes at a roadside café where a truck driver, just a little guy, was perched on a stool at a table quietly eating his lunch.

As the three guys swaggered in, they spotted him and grabbed his food away from him and laughed in his face.

The truck driver said nothing, he just quietly got up, paid for his food and walked out.

One of the three bikers, unhappy he had not been able to provoke the little guy into a fight said to the waitress, "well, he wasn't much of a man was he?"

The waitress replied "well I guess not" and then she added "he's not much of a truck driver either, because he just ran over your motorbikes".

We love a story where the little guy, the underdog, the nobody becomes the hero. It gives us courage to think that someone with the odds stacked against them can triumph over adversity.

A few years ago my daughter Anna worked during the vacations at a Summer School. Children are sent to the UK for a few weeks to learn our language and are away from home for quite a long time. They might only be seven or eight and Anna was house-mistress and had care of 40 children when they weren't in lessons or on outings.

One day a little chap came to Anna and was very tearful. He was homesick and feeling lonely and he wanted to go home but his parent's wouldn't come and collect him and so Anna was offering comfort and encouragement. She told him he had to be brave and she said "you've got to try – can you do that?" He said "if I can I can – but I don't can!"

His English was better than Anna's Arabic.

Perhaps you have moments like that when it all seems too much and you think "I don't can"...I can't do this.

We have been exploring Gideon's character and story. We know that left to his own devices he is afraid anxious and weighed down as much by a sense of inherited inferiority as well as personality.

The Angel of the Lord said – go in the strength you have and save Israel from the Midianites and Gideon said "I don't can"!!

We've seen how God is faithful to His promise and is with Gideon. When filled with the spirit Gideon is made utterly complete and is able to summon an army of 32,000 to his side.

Even when his fears and worries return, God graciously works alongside Gideon, giving him signs of victory and reassurance. But this week we see that quite honestly God is having a laugh!!

There are 135000 Midianites camped in the valley and Gideon has an army of only 32,000. That's would be like playing the all blacks with only four men on the field. Actually that would be slightly better odds).

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It's the most natural and normal thing in the world to want MORE and God says, you need less.

Wanting more, having more and feeding our need for consumption is the Spirit of the age. Greed is good, said Gordon Gecko in the 1987 film Wall Street.

I wouldn't say I am greedy. I don't suppose you would say it of yourself but we do suffer from wanting more not less.

How many of you pack more clothes than you need for a holiday – even if it's just the weekend? Perhaps it's our weather but we pack clothes for sunny, clothes for wet, windy, restaurant clothes, clothes for a walk. Our wardrobes themselves could tell the story most of us have more than we need.

How many of you over-cater for Christmas? Up to a certain point last year we were doing fine then suddenly an anxiety comes about all the guests and before you know it the pantry is groaning and we are eating up food for weeks and weeks. There's only so much Stollen a man can eat.

Any of us can have that feeling of wanting and needing more it comes out of an experience of scarcity and having less.

We could argue this theologically. There are scriptures to support that MORS is good. Isn't abundance a sign of God's kingdom? The water turned into wine – gallons of it. A miraculous catch of fish, enough to nearly sink the boat.

On the one hand, MORE (abundance) is a sign of the kingdom. On the other, LESS (scarcity) is an occasion for God to demonstrate his power and reveal his kingdom – surely we pray and want MORE, not LESS.

Although his circumstances are very different, I think our own small experiences can give us empathy with Gideon. Remember his default character is afraid and anxious. . Even when God is powerfully at work in him, his instincts will be to want more, more signs, more reassurance, more men! And we would agree!

The only source of the inner story of Gideon must have been Gideon. He must have told it again and again and then it became something passed down from generation to generation. When finally written down the author wants us to be sure what Gideon's experience was. It was God telling him what to do.

How? A small voice in his head? Ideas from nowhere? Did God turn up again and speak? We don't know – but our own stories use the same shorthand....God led me, showed me, told me to do this. It was God's idea to reduce down the army.

Gideon sends home anyone scared and 22,000 go home.

Secondly Gideon selects a much smaller band of cautious, watchful people, noting how they drank at the waters edge.. he ends up with 300.

God's big cunning strategy for defeating 135,000 enemy warriors is going to be to shout Booo, shine a torch, smash a pot and scare them. Cool.

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The more I thought about it, the more I realised how scary only 300 torches would be. You wouldn't possibly imagine there were only 300 men. You would expect 32,000 minimum, so the few torches you could see were the front of a huge army storming right down on top of you. No wonder they panicked. Not knowing what was behind the torches led to the panic. That and God being at work.

How can we apply this story to our lives? What spiritual lessons are there for us? I suspect we have a lot of Gideon in us. Anxious and afraid.

The first thing to notice is that God turns the tables. Gideon was the one frightened and afraid, now it's the enemy. God turns our fears and failings into his opportunity for glory.

What is your biggest problem.

Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to shout it out or tell your neighbour. Your biggest problem might be your neighbour and that would be awkward. What is the biggest problem you face?

It might be a personal issue of health or a relationship or a family problem. It might be work related or to do with finances. I'm conscious of young people returning to school and college and Uni. What about their friendships or the lack of them?

These are the real battles we face but the battle isn't with the facts – but with the whisper in your ear that there is nothing you can do, no solution, nothing will change, it might even get worse.

For those of us following Jesus Christ we must remember our spiritual battle is with Satan and he will always use the real problems we face to make them seem as vast and as scary as Gideon's enemy army. In Ephesians Chapter 6 it says...

¹² For our^[b] struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

The real issue and problems you face are as real as Gideon's 135,000 enemies but Satan will use the problems to make you ineffective or at worse lose faith. We need to learn to say Booo to our problems!!

The Psalmist teaches us how. The Psalmist never holds back from telling God what the problem is, what is expected of God, why God should help and why we can praise even while facing tough times. Lots of Psalms serve as an illustration but what about Psalm 3

O Lord, how many are my foes!

Many are rising against me;

² many are saying to me,

"There is no help for you^[a] in God." *Selah*

³ But you, O Lord, are a shield around me,
my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.

⁴ I cry aloud to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy hill. *Selah*

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⁵ I lie down and sleep;

I wake again, for the Lord sustains me.

⁶ I am not afraid of ten thousands of people

who have set themselves against me all around.

⁷ Rise up, O Lord!

Deliver me, O my God!

For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;

you break the teeth of the wicked.

⁸ Deliverance belongs to the Lord;

may your blessing be on your people! *Selah*

That is how to pray!! That is how to turn the tables on Satan.

Of course our prayers are aided if we follow the example of Jesus. Our gospel reading led us to this astonishing promise of Jesus...

¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me^[e] for anything, I will do it.

It's not an open cheque book – it's dependent upon staying as deeply within Christ as he was with His father so that what you ask for is 100% in accord with God's will.

If we at Holy Trinity are sincere about living by faith and being known by love and being a voice of hope, problems are going to come our way...real ones.

If we hope to grow as a church and share the good news of Jesus we will have challenges to overcome.

I've been sharing the building blocks for being a growing church through this little series on Gideon. We are called to be Holy we are called to love one another and we are called to be a people of prayer.

Scarcity leads us to want to fill the void with stuff, things, having more. But scarcity can lead us to turn to God seeking more of Him!

Problems can leave us ineffective, scared, doubting. But problems can lead us to turn to God seeking more of His strength.

That 3:00am in the morning feeling that "I don't can" can undermine our faith – or it can cause us, like the Psalmist to cry out in prayer.

Whatever it is we long for as a church, the pathway is there. It includes Holiness, loving each other and prayer.