

Pride comes before a fall
Judges 8:22-35
Luke 18:18-25

You may be surprised by this – but I have been known to open my mouth and stick my foot in it.

I'm going to gloss over the recent occasion when I congratulated a young woman on expecting her first baby – she wasn't actually pregnant. When I saw her the next evening I tried to claim the remark had been made by my foolish identical twin brother but she wasn't buying that.

The occasion that comes to mind was not long after Katherine and I had married, we were living in our first house and were happy to host the house group we belonged to. Our church house group was a mixed group of different ages and we had an older retired couple who were a lovely couple, deeply committed Christians, wise and kind and prayerful.

The person who had owned the house before us had seen fit to install the tiniest cloakroom possible under the stairs; Gentlemen if I tell you it was impossible to use when standing up, you will imagine how small the space was with the sloping roof of the stairs coming up at you, and it was very very narrow too.

One house group evening, the lady asked if she could use the cloakroom. She was a lady of certain proportions and before my wife could knock me unconscious with a frying pan I blurted out – you won't fit.

I would love to tell you that is the only time I have embarrassed Katherine – sadly its not.

We can all say and do something we come to regret, either right away or later. Some of us do things more regularly than others.

God willing most of these can be put right with a little humility and being genuinely sorry – and the kindness of those who recognise a fool when they meet one.

If our foolishness creates no lasting outcome – then thanks be to God. If it causes harm, perhaps we can in some way work to mitigate the problem we've caused.

But what if we blunder and don't realise we've blundered. What if we take a decision or say something and it's only a good while later that the results of our foolishness are revealed? What if we do something with the very best of intentions but it backfires. The ramifications might be huge.

That's the heart of today's section of our series on Gideon.

Before getting to it, I'm going to briefly recap the elements of the story we have explored over the last three weeks.

Gideon is a young man who is afraid and angry and confined by inherited inferiority and a sense of personal helplessness. His country is raided annually by neighbouring bands of warriors who steal and destroy.

God sends the Angel of the Lord to call Gideon to be the mighty warrior God knows him to be.

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His first act was to destroy his father's altar to the god Baal and put in its place an altar to Jehovah – but because he is afraid he does this at night. I saw this action as a reminder that we are called to be **Holy**.

The enemy swarm over the land again and Gideon experiences the promise of God to be with him – he's filled with the Spirit and calls out an army of 32,000, yet his anxiety and fear haven't left him completely. He requires signs from God to re-assure him of favour and victory and God gives them. I explored the biggest challenge we face...not an army of 135,000 against us but the command to love one another. If it was easy, Jesus wouldn't have said it so often...but with the help of the spirit – we learn to **love each other**.

Last week we saw God demonstrating that scarcity is the opportunity for his power. He reduces Gideon's army of 32,000 to 300 and with the 300 Gideon turns the tables. From being a frightened boy hiding in a wine press, the enemy becomes a fearful, panicking, chaotic mob who destroy each other. I explored how we might **learn to pray** powerfully and turn the tables on our enemy and see God's hand at work. I recommended praying like the Psalmist, remind God who he is!! Remind him of his promises!! Set out the problem, invite God to intervene – give praise.

And this week I'm skipping over the way the enemy was defeated, the pursuit of the last 15,000, the execution of the two princes that killed his brothers, and the way Gideon dealt with the Israelites who refused to help him – it's all there in chapters 6 and 7 and 8 for you to read and mull over. I'm looking at the sorrowful moment when just as Gideon gets it SO right – he does something and it all goes horribly wrong.

Gideon has absolute victory over the enemy and his personal enemies that killed his brothers. He has the complete adoration of the nation and the people clamour for him to become their King and Gideon gets it SO right.

But Gideon told them, 'I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you.'

That's right! Those stories Gideon listened too about God rescuing the Israelites and Moses and Joshua and all that history had taught him that the Hebrews had one God and HE was their king. He gets it right.

But what happens next I have been mulling over for quite a while and I'll share with you my conclusion about what went wrong but disagree with me if you will. Share with me afterwards where you think it went wrong, because that (for me) is the tricky thing. Just where do things go wrong?

I said in conversation with someone this week that Satan will sew seeds of destruction and wait for them to mature. He will use our weaknesses and frailties and our own story against us. Spotting the moment and recognising where things go wrong requires openness to the Holy Spirit and God's word AND to each other. I'll come back to that point.

Having got it so right, this happens next. Gideon said, 'I do have one request, that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder.' (It was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings.)

²⁵ They answered, 'We'll be glad to give them.' So they spread out a garment, and each of them threw a ring from his plunder onto it.

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You might think that this is the moment. What is Gideon doing this for? On the one hand – why not? Why not take some additional plunder from their victory? Why not get his reward for leading the people? Theologically lets support Gideon for the worker is worthy of his hire!

But on the other hand...was he trying to feather his nest and not look to God to provide? Should there have been an offering to God? But on balance, I decided that this WASN'T where it went wrong.

Next Gideon uses the gold to make an ephod and my opinion is that this is consistent with his previous statement. *The Lord will rule over you.*

An Ephod was a priestly garment. In it's simplest form it was a simple tunic – the young Samuel wore an ephod tunic as a boy in the temple.

But the ceremonial ephod was a breastplate and was highly ornamental and decorative. It had two stones fitted into it that were taken and used for decision making, they gave a simple Yes or No answer. In times past people would enquire of God and the priest wearing the ephod would aid them with the Urim and Thurrim – that's what the stones were called. It would appear that these two stones were in a small bag and effectively they helped bring about an answer in a yes or no way.

So for example – say we had to choose someone from the congregation for a specific task. Should it be the right hand side of the congregation (draw out a stone) – NO. So it's someone over here.

Is it the front pews. (draw out a stone) YES – so it's someone on these pews.

And this process would carry on until it whittled down to an answer. My evangelical heritage gets a bit twitchy about it, but I accept it was common practice as part of a prayer asking God to guide.

So we can see what was in Gideon's mind. The Lord will rule over you – therefore the mechanism for ruling and decision making must be in place. I think his motives seem sound and his desire to see God's hand at work runs through the whole story from his first sentences in the winepress.

But it all went horribly wrong and I think I have tracked down why.

Most bible translations simply say that he made an ephod, but I went digging and discovered that it was more likely to be a statue with ephod. (*The reference came from the contemporary English version*)

Well that all makes sense – because the people started worshipping the statue and not God and willingly gave themselves to the idol.

Gideon seemed to have the right desires but after all he achieved he took this misguided and tragic step which contributed to the people falling away from God...again!

Our Gospel reading isn't about a foolish blunder or misguided decision, but nevertheless it reveals that for the young man who had got so much right in his life, there was a hurdle he couldn't get over. He had followed the commandments and had done all that was required for living a righteous life – and Jesus

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saw in him the one weakness that prevented him from fully entering the kingdom – his wealth. The statement Jesus makes has made a good cartoon story I've enjoyed telling children, about a camel trying to squeeze through a tiny gate.

The two readings have this in common – idolatry. A real one in Gideon's case and the idolatry of his wealth for the young ruler. Their life experience, their own story provides a fertile ground for Satan to whisper his ideas and sew the seeds that will then take root and cause harm. How shall we proceed so that we don't live in fear of a mistake or hide in a winepress and not live at all?

We should embrace **Humility**.

The writer CS Lewis said – One must reach the point of not caring two straws about his own status before he can wish wholly for God's kingdom, not his own to be established.

If we befriend humility the first step is to recognise that the mistakes and failings and foolishness we so easily see in others could very easily be our own.

Humility recognises that we may, even with the best of motives, have acted unwisely, insensitively, crassly.

Humility reminds us that without the grace of God and His kindness to us, we would be in a far worse state.

And Humility recognises that we need God's presence with us to guide our steps.

I love the promise in Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the mountains –
where does my help come from?

² My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot slip –
he who watches over you will not slumber;

Our journey with Gideon has called us to a life of holiness, to love one another, to a life of active prayer and to humility.

These are our hallmarks, our goals and ambitions. We shall find, in all humility, that the desires of our hearts; to have a growing church, a Spirit filled church, a loving church, an exciting heart-of-the-community church, a church buoyant with young people, a church that is a sign of the kingdom of God – will come to pass, if we seek holiness, to love each other, to pray and to be humble.