Deborah – ‘bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh’

I want to raise something people have very set ideas about → whatever I say = run risk of getting in over my head. I am going to raise the topic of gender roles – the tension between the roles that males and females perform. As I say, very set ideas → but want to take what I think is a different approach – so please bear with me because it has relevance to the book of Judges

Prayer – may the Lord challenge us with Judges

Then the LORD raised up judges to rescue the Israelites from their attackers. Yet Israel did not listen to the judges but prostituted themselves by worshiping other gods. How quickly they turned away from the path of their ancestors, who had walked in obedience to the LORD’s commands.

Whenever the LORD raised up a judge over Israel, he was with that judge and rescued the people from their enemies throughout the judge’s lifetime. For the LORD took pity on his people, who were burdened by oppression and suffering. But when the judge died, the people returned to their corrupt ways, behaving worse than those who had lived before them. They went after other gods, serving and worshiping them. And they refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. Judges 2:16-19

As I’ve said in the previous weeks → Judges is by and large the story of how the people fell! The book progresses from the fine state the people found themselves in at the death of Joshua through how they became corrupted → Turned away from the path of their ancestors and worshiped other gods. God would continually raise up for them Judges that would rescue them both from their enemies and in some measure restore them in obedience to the LORD’s commands.

But when the judge died, the people returned to their corrupt ways, behaving worse than those who had lived before them so things become worst and worst.

But running parallel to this spiritual fall is an increasing disruption of the relationship between the genders – particularly expressed in the abuse of women. → Why should that be so? There are a couple aspects to it:

God himself frequently uses the picture of himself as bridegroom and Israel as his bride to describe the relationship between himself and his people. When the people turn away and worship other gods then they are committing adultery. I particularly like the way this is portrayed by Jeremiah

“Go and shout this message to Jerusalem. This is what the LORD says:
“I remember how eager you were to please me as a young bride long ago,
how you loved me and followed me even through the barren wilderness.
…But you have been unfaithful to me, you people of Israel!
You have been like a faithless wife who leaves her husband.
I, the LORD, have spoken.” Jeremiah 2:2, 3:20

Furthermore Paul writes at end of book of Ephesians how the relationship of Christ to the Church is a reflection of the relationship between a man and wife… and vice versa. I won’t read the whole passage but it ends with:
As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.” This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. Ephesians 5:31-11

So what I’m trying to say is that inter gender relationships are a parable – more than a parable – they are a representation of God’s relationship with his people. → One of the ways we can understand our relationship with God who is invisible is to look at our relationships with our husbands or wives. → But even more so - that the state of our relationship with God has an outward expression in the relationships between men and women.

Let me put it another way – as it says in Proverbs 29:18 Where there is no vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.

When people depart from God’s way it comes out in their behavior – particularly in warped behaviors between men and women → and this is what we see in Judges:

Judges starts off with the situation when Joshua was still alive – I’m going to quickly run through Judges …. there are some powerful and some appalling, shocking stories right through this book – and particularly in the last chapters (← which I am not speaking on through this series)

At the start there is the noble = chivalrous - when Caleb says, ‘I’ll give my daughter’s hand in marriage to anyone who conquerors this city’ and the brave knight the first Judge, Orthniel does so

Then there is the notable story of Deborah the female judge and Jael the woman who kills Sisera – I’ll come back to Deborah because that is where I want to focus this morning

Gideon – forever reluctant to stand up and be a man – even his enemy says, “Don’t ask a boy to do a man’s job! Do it yourself!” Judges 8:21

Then there is the woman who kills Abinelech by dropping a mill stone on him
There is the warped piety of Jephthah who sacrifices his daughter to God Samson’s mother and his weak father
Samson himself and his shameful subversion of the power of God in his lust for Philistine women

Judges wraps up with the horrific tale of the rape and murder of the Levite’s concubine leading to civil war against the tribe of Benjamin. Values have become so distorted that this leads into the shameful massacre of their own people of Jabesh-gilead killing everyone but the young women to become wives for the surviving men of Benjamin and then the kidnap of more women for the same purpose.

→ So we see the role of women changing from the inspiration and heart of Israel → to becoming mere objects, sex slaves and baby factories. It is a shameful, shameful fall from grace for Gods people. As I say the corruption of the treatment of women mirrors the adultery of the people as they worship other Gods.

So what are appropriate gender roles for men and women? This is where I am walking into a potential minefield. Frankly I can’t debate the issues fully today, nor can I really explain fully my own views. Let me instead acknowledge the range of views that can be held – by sincere biblically backed Christians too I might add

One hand → feminist views that maintain that a women can and must do everything that a man does. Other end of the spectrum many believe in a femininity so that a woman’s place is in the
home, and women should not minister to, or lead men. Most of us fall somewhere between these extremes.

I believe there is a difference between men and women.  
_When God first brought Eve to Adam_
_Then the man said,_
_This at last is bone of my bones_  
_And flesh of my flesh_
_Genesis 2:23_

We can use bone and flesh to conveniently look at the question of gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bone – Masculine</th>
<th>Flesh – Feminine</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strength &amp; Structure</td>
<td>Life &amp; relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivated by things, contests, results, success, accomplishment, competency</td>
<td>Feelings, community, cooperation, intimacy, growth</td>
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I think in this we are perfectly complementary → plus men and women are both made of flesh and bone.  
Humanity is meant to be both flesh and bone.  
→ A body – the church as the body of Christ – no less a nation as a body of people:– without flesh a body is harsh, dead, dry and hollow. Equally a body without bones has no structure, or purpose → is just a blob going nowhere feeding itself.

→ Within this understanding I don’t think it limits the roles men and women can perform.

And Deborah the _wife of Lappidoth_ was a prophet who had become a judge in Israel. She would hold court under the Palm of Deborah which stood… in the hill country of Ephraim and the Israelites came to her to settle their disputes Judges 4:4-5

This kind of settles it. In a social setting as patriarchal (male dominated) as the ancient middle east a woman could not only be a prophet but could be a respected judge for the people – including judging and settling the disputes of the manly domain of land and property. Women are in no way secondary to men

~But I think it is all together too simple, that we’re missing something, if we simply leave things at that!  
This speaks to our present society. This last week – there was another horrific tale of abuse of women in Cleveland USA. Men had abducted teenage/early 20’s girls and held them captive for their personal gratification for over ten years. This is remarkably similar to the situation at the end of the book of Judges (chps 19-21). Our society is nearly as sick as theirs!  
I tell you – I think that man in Cleveland should rot in hell and personally wouldn’t hesitate to sign the death warrants to speed him there. For those three young women, my heart goes out to them and I know they desperately need the only thing that can take away the pain they must carry inside → That is the Love of Jesus.  
But you know what → Jesus can also bring forgiveness, redemption and healing to those men who did this despicable thing. Only Jesus can make it right. Those men in a sense are symptoms of a sick society. _The same thing has already happened in NZ – William Paul Cornelius held a woman for 5mths (& raped 3 others) but was let off by the courts last year because he was going senile – fortunately he died 4 mths later._

Let’s pray – for that situation in Cleveland

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When we look at the story of Deborah it comes in two parts – firstly chapter 4 is the chronicle of events: Deborah summons Barak and prophesies about raising an army to defeat the Canaanites that are oppressing the people. Barak does this alongside of Deborah, but the leader of the enemy – Sisera, commander of their army falls into the hands of a friendly ally of Israel and a woman named Jael kills him – by bashing a tent peg into his skull while he slept.

Then in chapter 5 is the Song of Deborah – which is a commentary on the events in poetic form. It wouldn’t make a lot of sense on its own, but since we know the events from chapter 4 – this is filled with insight and explanation. And as I looked at it I was struck by just how powerful a poem, and how relevant it is! (although being poetry~ there are differences between translations/interpretation)

Because in the Song we can see first of all the context – the backdrop to the story of Deborah is failed leadership in Israel. The opening line v2

“When Israel’s leaders take charge,  
and the people gladly follow - bless the LORD!”

This is poetic irony → because Israel’s leaders had failed - but now under Deborah and Barak things were restoring themselves. The poem explains how the leaders of Israel had failed:

“In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,  
and in the days of Jael,  
people avoided the main roads,  
and travelers stayed on winding pathways.  
There were few people left in the villages of Israel

Shamgar had been the previous Judge in Israel before Deborah and he’d killed lots of Philistines but evidently during his time The Israelites again did what was evil in the Lord's sight. (4:1) [and] When Israel chose new gods, war erupted at the city gates (5:8)

In other words it wasn’t safe to travel on the main highways → rather keep to hidden paths, while village economy was devastated = You couldn’t conduct everyday life and couldn’t build a home → which in our own bone and flesh ways is the desire of both men and women

That is → until Deborah arose as a mother for Israel…. (V7)

And her heart went out to Israel’s leaders, and to those who gladly would follow them. Bless the Lord (v9 paraphrase) - the villagers in Israel, the remnant of the noble – the ordinary people (V11 & 13).

Because those who should have been leading Israel had failed. They had failed to care for the people, to keep them on track. This remember is a poem → and a contrast is drawn between Deborah who leads Israel like a mother, a wise mother; with another mother at the end of the song: the enemy Sisera’s mother as she waits for her son not knowing that he has been killed by Jael

“From the window Sisera’s mother looked out.  
Through the window she watched for his return, saying,  
‘Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
Why don’t we hear the sound of chariot wheels?’

“Her wise women answer,  
and she repeats these words to herself;  
‘They must be dividing the captured plunder—  
with a woman or two for every man.”
There will be colorful robes for Sisera, and colorful, embroidered robes for me. Yes, the plunder will include colorful robes embroidered on both sides.’ V28-30

Sisera’s mother accepts the comforting words of her own falsely wise women, ‘Ahhh – he’s dividing up plunder. Taking some women’ (Women as sex objects again)

So Deborah stands in stark contrast
1. She is a leader who cares for the good of the people
2. She is not like the leader of the enemy or even their own failed leaders who think only of themselves
3. She is a leader who is concerned because Israel needs leaders
There is an unstated point here – a Leader like Joshua before, or David after would not be concerned that Israel needs leaders – because they themselves would provide the leadership

But Deborah is a woman! *The fact of the matter is*, it is more in the nature of men to claim and seek leadership. But often when women assume leadership it is because of the absence or the abdication of leadership from those men who should have assumed leadership!

I’ll draw you an analogy - Before MMP there were two strong political parties in NZ – the National Party of Rob Muldoon and the Labour Party of Norman Kirk. In one party the rising young leader was Winston Peters and in the other Jim Anderton – in a sense the natural heirs apparent. But something went wrong - Peters and Anderton fell out with their Parties that they might well have expected to one day lead; and formed minor fringe parties of their own instead. I think maybe a power vacuum was created in the political scene…

By year 2000 we reached an extraordinary situation - All the most powerful positions in the country came to be held by women – Prime Minister Helen Clark, leader of the Opposition Jenny Shipley, Governor General Silvia Cartwright, attorney general Margaret Wilson, Chief Justice Sian Elias and head of the largest company Telecom, Therese Gattung. Now I’m not making any comment whatsoever about any of these women - but where in this country were the men?

I think Deborah is standing in for the failure of men to lead in Israel. It is Deborah who summons Barak to pick up the mantle of leadership For Barak to show some headship (a biblical term) – to stand tall and be a man.

*Now I am* concerned with the state of New Zealand, but from a pastoral perspective right now I see the problem in the place where Deborah started Before she was a judge she was a prophet – a minister in the church in our terms.

Like Israel (and possibly our society) the western church is suffering from standoffishness of leadership at the grass roots. Sure there are the ‘names’ but at the coal face leadership is missing in action

**There are three problems**
1. The men (from whom a large section of leadership should be drawn) are simply absent in Church. Statistics from America, the most churched of western nations record that on an average Sunday across the country the attendance is 61% female and 39% male.

Deborah and Barak faced the same problem
Gilead remained east of the Jordan. And Dan, why did he stay home? Asher sat unmoved at the seashore, remaining in his harbours. V17
This is the typical situation for us (even Birkenhead Baptist). Unfortunately it is more often men who are “east of eden” – disaffected and rejecting of church. I’ve had the opportunity to view quite a few churches and I tell you it’s the same most everywhere – wives in church without their husbands. Christian women vainly looking for Christian men.

But you know what’s even more sad – and the blame lies with both the men and the churches that offer them nothing – it is also the professed Christian men who aren’t in church either!

Why did Asher stay home? – he probably thought it was more important to go fishing… or play golf or sleep in after his hard week at work.

There is a second problem

2. While at college I had to write an essay on a book/research done by Alan Jamieson (now Pastor of NZ’s second biggest Baptist Church – Spreydon in Christchurch) on ‘Churchless faith’ His research in New Zealand shows how many of the strongest Christians in our churches have become disaffected and somehow have decided they don’t need to be part of a church

But in the tribe of Reuben, there was great indecision.
Why did you sit at home among the sheepfolds – to hear the shepherds whistle for their flocks? In the tribe of Reuben there was great indecision (v 15-16)

Oh these disaffected Christians they keep their faith, sort of… (whistling to their own tune) really it starts to slip. The problem is if they have become disaffected, they are the very ones who should be working to fix things in the church. They are the thinkers, the pioneers of church life and ought to be experimenting to find solutions to the hole in their spiritual lives. But they’ve given up, can’t be bothered; so they have abandoned the rest of us – they are lazy, and cowards in the battle for the church’s future.

But the third problem is…

3. Those of us who are here in church are often simply sitting on our hands

They came down from Ephraim… and Benjamin also followed you… the Princes of Issachar were with Deborah and Barak…. (moral support)

But Zebulun risked his life, as did Naphtali, on the battlefield. V14,15,18.

Now no-one has a worst singing voice than I – Melissa reminds me this in no uncertain terms but (I’m not talking about this church) I see everywhere – when it comes time to sing praises to God men stand there staunch and strong with their lips locked and mouths firmly closed. What are they trying to prove – how staunch and self controlled they are? No its weakness and misplaced pride – not to sing praises to God.

2 Samuel 6:14-16 …And (King) David danced before the Lord with all his might… [his wife] Michal… looking down from her window… was filled with contempt for him.

How things have changed. Now men are too often worried about how they look and their bad voices to take a risk and praise God. But unfortunately that is only the beginning.

All too often across the western Church when a job needs doing a woman stands up to fill the gap. These are the modern day Deborah’s and they are everywhere. It is great that woman have freedom in Christ to assume leadership but the tragedy is they all too often they are doing it because their men have failed to take their share
But there is a twist to the story of Deborah. It is a story of leadership – of a woman picking up the mantle of leadership. Being both the bone and the flesh because that was what was needed.

→ However it is not just about leadership.
The big stuff, the glory, the master strategy was Deborah’s – all the stuff that usually it’s us men who get into. (I need to be careful here with my words)
→ I suspect many woman are not comfortable to assume this kind of leadership role and prefer the flesh of my flesh, rather than bone of my bone. In other words they prefer the role of relationships, community, intimacy and growth.
Well → The battle was won – but you know the old cliché about winning the battle not the war… well Sisera the military commander of the Canaanites escapes and while he lives the enemy can always rebuild. Unfortunately for him he flees and seeks refuge with Jael – unappreciated ally of Israel.

*Most blessed among women is Jael,  
the wife of Heber the Kenite.  
May she be blessed above all women who live in tents.  
Sisera asked for water,  
and she gave him milk.  
In a bowl fit for nobles,  
she brought him yogurt.  
Then with her left hand she reached for a tent peg,  
and with her right hand for the workman’s hammer.  
She struck Sisera with the hammer, crushing his head.  
With a shattering blow, she pierced his temples.  
He sank, he fell,  
he lay still at her feet.  
And where he sank,  
there he died. (v24-27)

I think there is poetic symbolism here ...gave him milk, in a bowl ... she brought him yogurt. ... she reached for a tent peg and ... she reached for the workman’s hammer.
The first two I think are symbols of **welfare, home and goodness** and the second two of **labour, building and settling** - in other words of women and of men. After all → this is what the Song of Deborah is about – about male and female roles as much as it is about leadership

Because in the end it isn’t the leader that wins the war – it is the ordinary soldier who puts his life on the line and the ordinary woman who sends him off and holds the fort at home. So it is in the church – as much as we need people to step up and lead we also need loyal, generous, hardworking and most of all courageous people to take their part whatever it may be.

So I want to set a challenge before us:
Women – fill the gap – like Deborah because you are needed!
Men – take courage, honour the women who are often standing our place and stand up and run programs, delve into the scripture and teach bible studies yourselves, pray, prophesy and be judges and war leaders for this time.
…It may not be your place to be a leader at this time -But above all else, let us all by like Jael - embodying all of what it means to be flesh and bone – sharing & working and making the best of opportunities that the Lord brings our way.

*Prayer & reflection*