

Commemorating Jephthah's daughter

In the 11th chapter of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament we find a roll call of faithful people of God in the Old Testament. It's an inventory of the great heroes of the faith who are worthy of remembrance and who are an inspiration for all God's people for all time. Included in the chapter there is a verse which goes as follows: 'Time is too short for me to tell stories of Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. Through faith they overthrew kingdoms, established justice, saw God's promises fulfilled.' How interesting that the name of Jephthah is included there. I wonder what that says about the writer. I wonder what it says that Jephthah is included in this list and not his daughter whose name we never are told. Surely she is the one to be remembered while Jephthah is best forgotten. The truth is that rather than being a paradigm of faith this man is a fool – a faithless and destructive fool.

So what do we know about Jephthah? Well, if we go back a bit we're told that he was the son of a prostitute and an unnamed father and that as a result he was despised and treated as an outcast. In other words, he suffered for the sins of his mother. Well, that's ironic, for Jephthah's poor daughter was destined to suffer big-time for the stupidity of her father. And we're told earlier on that Jephthah had a reputation as something of a hard man, so he'd been leant on to lead Israel's army against the Ammonites, the current military threat to God's people. And Jephthah had agreed and evidently the Lord endorsed the choice of Jephthah for we read that 'the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah.' Now, that's a great start. If you're going to be the commander of the Lord's army it's a huge advantage if you have the Spirit of the Lord to fight your battles. But why wasn't the Spirit of the Lord enough for Jephthah? Why did he make this stupid, foolish bargain with God that if God gave him victory he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of the door of his house on his return? What were you thinking, Jephthah? Wasn't the Spirit of God enough, without making bargains with God? You stupid man!

I want however to probe Jephthah a little for if we scratch the surface we find that we are dealing here with more than just random folly. We are dealing with more than just a thoughtless and impulsive man. I would suggest

to you that there are other forces at work in this story, other powers and influences that are at work in Jephthah and that lead him to act as he does. So, for example, first off, there is the power of religion that is in play in this story – disastrous, distorted, dysfunctional religion that brings destruction in its wake. I mean, who is this God that Jephthah needs to bargain with? Who is this God who has to be cajoled with the prospect of a sacrifice in order to get him to make a deal? This is not the God of Israel! The God of Israel cannot be propositioned this way. The God of Israel is not susceptible to bargains and bribes and bartering. In fact, in a sense Jephthah has already lost the battle with the Ammonites by making this kind of bargain because in doing so he is succumbing to the Ammonite gods and their ways, including their lust for human sacrifice. So Jephthah's daughter – his poor, nameless, only daughter – is not just the victim of her father's stupidity. She is the victim of distorted, deathly religion, and God knows we are familiar enough with that in human history.

But then, of course, the power of war is also at work in the story. 'So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hands. He inflicted a massive defeat on them...' and so on. What we have there is one more description of one more war, one more despatch from the front, one more tedious account of slaughter and suffering. And so Jephthah's daughter – his poor, nameless only daughter - is the victim of war, the power of war, what we now call 'collateral damage'. And the drums of war are beating as loud as ever in our world this morning.

But there is another power at work here. There is too the power of patriarchy, the power of a world made in the image of man. It's the world that remembers the name of Jephthah the fool, but not his courageous, dignified daughter. This passage reeks of Jephthah's contempt for women. He must know that there is a tradition in Israel that when the men come home from war the women come out to celebrate with their tambourines and their dancing. Centuries before when Israel passed through the Red Sea Moses' sister Miriam took up her tambourine and danced and the women followed her. What value does Jephthah put upon women that he makes his reckless vow to sacrifice whoever he sees first – and is his only regret that the victim is his daughter, rather than some other dispensable female? And get this: when Jephthah realises what has happened and who the victim must be, what does he say? What remorse does he show? Listen again to verse 35: 'Alas, my daughter!

You have brought me very low! You have brought great trouble to me!’
 What? With what kind of male blinkers does he view the world? ‘Alas, my daughter, you have brought me very low!’ Excuse me, Jephthah, this is not all about you. And ‘you have brought great trouble to me!’ Oh – so this mess is the daughter’s fault for coming out to greet her old man when he comes home victorious! Silly woman!

This, then, is Jephthah’s daughter – his poor, nameless, only daughter - the victim, yes, of a foolish father, but a victim of far more, of the powers of religion and of war and of patriarchy. Yet the beautiful thing, the real heart of this story, is that Jephthah’s nameless daughter will not allow herself to be remembered simply as a victim. Given the tragedy of her situation, this woman will not lie down passively and submit. Given the hopelessness, given the cards stacked against her, her voice will be heard. Squeezed and constrained by events, she will create space for herself. Intimidated by the prospect of her life terminated, she will make time for herself. If she must die, then she will die on her terms. And so she goes to her father, and rather than bargain and manipulate as is his default mode, she puts her simple request: ‘spare me for two months, that I may roam the hills with my companions and mourn that I must die a virgin.’ And her father says, ‘go!’

There follows, surely, one of the most poignant scenes in all of Scripture: Jephthah’s daughter in the company of her companions, roaming the hills, a brief interlude before her inevitable, violent death. The image that comes to mind, inappropriately enough, is of a strange parody of a hen party. After all, instead of celebrating impending marriage this daughter mourns her eternal virginity; instead of rejoicing in the fulfilment of marriage – the only possible fulfilment for a woman in her day – she grieves that she will never be other than single and childless. Where nowadays hen parties jet to Ibiza for a weekend of indulgence, here the woman and her friends roam the hills and lament.

There is, however, more to this group of women than mourning and pain. In fact there is a wonderful ambiguity about them. Yes, of course there is such sadness and pathos in their gathering. As they come together they cannot but be mindful of those powers, those destructive forces that prey upon their lives. Their world is scarred by oppressive religion and war and patriarchy, as well as countless other powers that control and sap human life. And they gather with this daughter who is condemned to die. Yet that is not all for here, in this

group, something hopeful is happening. Something different is taking place among them. This group represents a refusal to submit to these deathly powers on their terms. It represents defiance. For a start, among these women there is companionship. This daughter, we have been told, is an only daughter. She is used to solitude and isolation. She comes out alone with tambourine and dancing to greet her father. Yet now for these last two months of her life she has companionship, solidarity. She does not face her death alone. And note well - this little group, this non-hen party, is a male free zone. There's not a man in sight. Here, for two glorious months, the spectre of patriarchy and sexism is banished. And here too war is distant and forgotten, for these are women and women do not fight the wars – that's men's business and with no men war is absent. And maybe it's not stretching things to say that religion – Jephthah's oppressive macho religion that strikes deals and drives bargains – no longer features among these women. And I doubt that those two months are all wailing and woe. This daughter and her companions are inhabiting a zone so gloriously free of deathly powers that I'm sure they found time to laugh and to sing and to dance and to tell their stories.

It has been suggested that this daughter is a type of Christ, one who suffers for the sins of the world, and indeed she is. But we also see in this woman – and her companions – an image of Christ's body, the church. Here in the church, as with them, the reality of evil is acknowledged and its effect on our lives. Here we name the powers that oppress human life and ravage the world. Here we stand in solidarity with the grieving, the afflicted, with those facing death. We know how to mourn. We know how to lament. But here too these deathly powers are opposed and resisted. As the church we are called to be a liberated zone, a community of companionship over against the powers that stalk and kill. Whether it's dysfunctional religion, or war, or patriarchy, or the power of mammon, or any of the other countless powers that prey upon us and that diminish and demean human life, we are called to join this daughter and her friends as they leave these things behind and roam the hills in solidarity.

The passage ends by saying there was a tradition in Israel that every year this daughter was commemorated for four days. Sadly, that does not happen any more and it is her foolish father rather than she that is remembered as a hero of the faith. The best commemoration, the best memorial to this daughter, would be a church worthy of her and her companions. Amen.

O holy, gracious God,
Eternal, sovereign over all,
in you we find freedom,
in you we find fulfilment,
in you life flourishes
and in seeking your glory we find our glory.
We praise and worship you.

And you have bound us together
and named us as your people,
called to be set apart as a people in whom
your purposes for the world are exhibited;
called to be a first-fruit, an anticipation
of your new creation that is coming.

O God forgive us that there is so much
of the old in us.
Forgive us that we resist and reject your rule
and so fall prey to the rule of other
powers and forces that short-change us
and take away our freedom,
becoming so much less than what we have been made to be.

O God we acknowledge to you our folly,
our captivity to the very things that destroy us.
Confessing our sins...

O loving God,
in Christ our Lord we are freed from captivity to other lords
and in Christ the risen one we are raised to new life.
Send your Holy Spirit upon us,
draw us together into the community of the redeemed
and empower us to live the life of your Kingdom.
We pray in the name of Jesus our Saviour
and in his words we pray together, saying...