

## Joshua 24

(A sermon preached in St Andrew's church, St Andrews, 24 March 2002)

The last chapter of Joshua is much more than the last chapter of the book of Joshua. It's a pivot on which the whole story of Israel in the OT turns. It ends something that started way back in Genesis 12 and it sets the stage for everything that follows. This means that it's also much more than the end of the story of Joshua himself. This is not Joshua's personal farewell to the people he has led for half a lifetime: that already happened - in ch 23. Here in ch 24, when Joshua summons all the people to Shechem, it is not really to hear Joshua himself address them for the last time. It is 'before God' that they assemble (as we see in v 1), and it is on God's behalf, in God's name, that Joshua addresses them. For this is a decisive act of renewal of God's covenant with his people Israel, and Joshua now performs the role of his predecessor Moses, the role of spokesman for God to his covenant people. God has now at last completed all he needed to do for the establishment of Israel as his own people. Back in Genesis 12, God called Abraham to be the beginning of this story; he promised land and posterity to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob; he brought Israel out of Egypt; he made his covenant with them and gave them his law at Mt Sinai; and finally he did what the book of Joshua is all about: he gave them the land of Canaan. (Notice how that whole story from Abraham onwards is resumed at some length in the first part of what Joshua says: vv 2-13.) So now, when the conquest of the land is as complete as it is ever going to be, it's time for the covenant to be renewed, time for that binding agreement between God and Israel to be reaffirmed. God has now fulfilled his promises, Israel must now renew their pledge to be his loyal people, and thereby the stage is set for the rest of Israel's story as it unfolds from the book of Judges on down to the books of Nehemiah and Esther.

The covenant is essentially a very simple matter: it is what makes God Israel's God and what makes Israel God's people. It's about God's identity as Israel's God and about Israel's identity as that God's people. In order to love and serve this God as their own God Israel must know who this God is. In knowing who God is they will also, of course, know what their own identity as this God's people must be. (The issue is equally important and decisive for us, of course: who is the God we claim to know and serve? If we can't answer that question, it makes no sense to be Christians. It makes no sense to entrust our lives to a God who has no identity that we can rely on. But if we do know who God is, then we are given our own identity too. Who we are - finally and comprehensively - are people who know and love *this God*.) But then which God? Who is this God? The biblical God is best known from the *story* (or stories) in which he becomes our God. His identity is found in the biblical story that also gives the people of God their identity. If that story of that God becomes our own story, then we know the biblical God as our own God and we ourselves become his people. In the Bible, there's no escaping that close link between God's identity and his people. In the OT, for all that God is the creator of the universe and the God of all nations, he chooses to be known best as the God of his people Israel.

So that's why Joshua, speaking in God's name, tells the story. Starting from Abraham and his father and brother - that's right back in Genesis 11 before God's call to Abraham - the whole story down to the end of the story in Joshua is summarized. So

the key question we must ask is: Who is this God, who is God in this story? What will it mean to know and to serve this God, as Israel now chooses once again to commit themselves to doing? If we want to do what Israel does in this chapter, then of course we have a longer story to tell: we must add the NT story of Jesus. But God hasn't changed. Our God is still who he was in the story of Israel, still Israel's God, and so we too can remember with Israel, read Israel's story in fact as our own, and ask who this God is who appears in the story.

A striking feature of the story, as Joshua tells it, is that most of verbs have God as their subject, only a few have Israel as their subject. It's a story mostly about what God did for Israel or their ancestors. Of course, all through the story the people must be doing all kinds of things, but the overwhelming emphasis is on what God did. And notice too, that the most common of these verbs that have God as their subject is the verb 'to give'. To put it theologically, if you like, God's grace precedes Israel's actions and far exceeds what Israel does. Who God is in this story is the gracious, generous, giving God, who gives more fundamentally than he demands. To serve this God, as Israel is invited to do, is to respond, in gratitude and love, to the one who has done all this gratuitously - all these quite improbable and extraordinary events that created the little nation of Israel in the face of all the might of the powerful nations of the day and carved out a space for them in a world which could not otherwise have found room for them. God went to such lengths of love for his people - is the overwhelming message of the story - and therefore Israel can know that God's demands on them, to serve him, to obey his commandments, also stem from God's love for them. They are not the demands of a tyrant, not some kind of oppressive subjection to law, but the framework for the kind of life the God who loves them desires for them, ways in which the life of God's people will reflect his great love for them. Obeying God is an altogether different matter according to whether one truly knows who God is. To obey the God who has committed himself to us in a love that goes as far as this biblical God's love has - to obey this God who has made our own good his extravagant concern - that's quite different from submitting to impersonal religious or moral requirements. Israel in this chapter sees that when they say in effect: "Of course, we will serve this God," repeating back to Joshua the same story of what this God has done for them. "God being this God, of course we will serve him."

Let's look a little more closely at the story. It has three main chapters:

First, there are the ancestors: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (vv 2-4). Who is God in this chapter of the story? He is the God who breaks with the past and opens up a new future, the God who gives hope, the God who promises new and unforeseen possibilities for life.

The second chapter is the exodus from Egypt (vv 5-7). Who is God in this chapter of the story? He is the God who liberates from the dominant powers of the world, enabling people to break free from all that enslaves them.

The third chapter is the conquest of the land, with that emphatic conclusion: 'I gave you a land on which you had not laboured, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and orchards that you did not plant' (v 13). Who is God in this chapter of the story? He is the God who provides generously and lavishly the means of life.

So how must Israel respond to this God? What is the appropriate way to be the people of such a God? Joshua tells them, positively and negatively (v 14).

Positively: 'revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness.' Negatively: 'put away the gods your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord'.

'Revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness.' This God requires to be taken with ultimate seriousness. This God requires to be served wholeheartedly, with total dedication, with one's whole life and being: that's the meaning of the word my version translates rather weakly as 'in sincerity.' And this God requires lasting commitment - faithfulness - a decision to serve him not just for the time being, while it suits us, but forever and whatever. That word 'serve' is off-putting to many modern people: maybe it suggests some kind of slavish subjection to someone else's will. But service of God is not demeaning or dehumanizing. Service of God is a great privilege. Servants of God can hold their heads high and walk tall because the Creator and Lord of all things has called them to his service. Service of God is true human dignity.

What is overwhelmingly clear in this passage of Joshua is that the devotion and service this biblical God requires of his people is total and uncompromising. This God whose love went to such lengths for his people desires nothing less than their wholehearted love in response. Verse 19 says that God is a jealous God - and it uses that word 'jealous' in an entirely good sense. It's God's love for us that is jealous - meaning that he desires our undivided devotion to him and will not tolerate rivals to his love. He will not share us with other gods.

And so these positive imperatives - to revere and to serve God wholeheartedly - are accompanied by the negative imperative: to put away other gods. The passage makes a lot of this. The people have a real choice - between God and the false gods. Joshua actually mentions three categories of false gods, corresponding to the three chapters of Israel's story. There are the gods of Mesopotamia, left behind by Abraham and his family when God called them to a different life and a new future. The people could go back to those gods. Then there are the gods of Egypt, the divine sanctions for Pharaoh's oppressive state terrorism. The people could go back to those gods and the slavery they entailed. And finally, most appealingly, there are the native gods of the land they now live in, the gods of the Canaanites (or the Amorites, as our passage calls them). These are the gods of fertility and prosperity. Forgetting that God gave them the land, Israel was always tempted to worship instead the local gods *of* the land.

All of these gods contrast with the God of Israel as Israel knows him in the story from Abraham onwards. Unlike the God who opens up a new future, the gods Abraham left behind are the gods who keep people trapped in hopeless situations, knowing they should change their lives but unable to break the entail of the past. To put away those gods is to set out on that remarkable venture of faith that Abraham took when God gave him the hope that things could be different.

Unlike the God who liberates from slavery, the gods of Egypt are the gods of the dominant powers. One can be enslaved to them either as their victims, as Israel in Egypt was, or as their accomplices, as some of the Israelites in Egypt were. Either way the gods make these powers seem all-powerful and unchallengeable. However much the dominant system keeps people in poverty, incites greed or violence, or

treats human life and dignity with contempt, the gods of the system let it be known that there is no alternative. To put away those gods is to follow the God of exodus, the God who brings people out of captivity to the dominant values and practices of the world.

Thirdly, the gods of the good life lead us to worship material things and pleasures rather than the true God who gave them. They drive us in a frenzy of earning and getting and consuming, luring us with the lie that we can never have enough. They are among the most powerful gods in our own society - the gods, perhaps, OF our society, the contemporary West's patron deities. To put away those gods is to learn gratitude to the God who is the source of all good things, to receive them as his gifts, and to share them with others.

So Israel must choose - between the true God and the false gods. There are always a plethora of false gods. Almost anything can be a god for those who let it dominate their lives. But there is only one true God, the jealous God who wants us wholly for himself and will not share us with other gods. Here there is no room for compromise or accommodation. Compromise and accommodation are always the easier way, so it seems, and Israel tried them over and again. But again and again the Bible insists on the same decisive, once-and-for-all choice Israel was required to make in Joshua 24. Remember Elijah in the great contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel: 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions?' he says to the people who would rather not have to choose. But compromise in this matter is a fatal encumbrance: it keeps us limping, unable to actually set off actually walking in any direction at all. In this matter it is essential to make a decision and to stick to it, to resolve to live one's life by it. Jesus said much the same in his little parable about the slave who tries unsuccessfully to serve two masters: either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. The lesson - Jesus says: 'You cannot serve God and Mammon.' Mammon means money, but Jesus uses it as a kind of name because he's thinking of wealth as a false god, an idol, a rival object of devotion alternative to God.

But is this black-and-white thinking appropriate? Isn't most of our life fairly muddled and grey? Our choices are ambiguous, we have mixed motives, issues are complex. But we should remember that these passages of Scripture are talking about a fundamental choice in life, a resolution to live either for God or for false gods. The philosopher Kierkegaard said: 'A person can be good and evil, but one cannot simultaneously choose to become both good and evil.' There is a fundamental choice to be made, and if we do not make it deliberately and consciously, we will make it by default. The default setting is the false gods.

Of course the decision for God is one that needs to be reaffirmed again and again. To that end the Israelites had a lasting reminder of their covenant promises. Joshua erected a large stone in the open-air sanctuary in Shechem (vv 26-27). Whenever they saw it they'd remember it was there because it had witnessed their renewal of their covenant with God. It might be worth thinking what equivalents to the stone we have.

I've left till last the rather surprising feature of this story. Joshua first urges the people to choose - God or the false gods. Israel responds with a thoroughly positive

and resolute determination to serve the Lord (vv 16-18). They repeat the story. They know who this God is, they recognize all he has done for them, they avow that he is their God, and after all that they cannot contemplate serving other gods. But Joshua pours cold water on all this eagerness: "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God and a jealous God." One of the commentators describes this as 'the most shocking statement in the OT.' There are rather a lot of very shocking statements in the OT, but one sees what he means. Is it actually not possible to serve the true God?

Evidently Joshua is deeply concerned that Israel's decision must not be made lightly, even if the reasons are the right ones. This is a hard and serious and even dangerous choice, because God's demands are so total and uncompromising. The false gods are much more tolerant. One can start serving any of the false gods almost on one's own terms. They don't have to be given the whole of one's life straightaway. A foothold in one's life is enough for the false gods to wheedle their way in until they're in a position to take over altogether. The difference with the true God is that he doesn't entice us deceitfully and he doesn't take us over. He makes it quite plain what he demands of us and that he demands it of us voluntarily. He wants the entire love of our hearts in response to the entire love of his heart. It is because he loves us so much that he expects of us so much - too much, it may sometimes seem. Choosing God is dangerous not because he has anything but love for us, but because he loves us so completely and utterly.

Jesus told a parable about this too. In a move that may surprise us just as much as Joshua's discouragement of Israel's choice for God, Jesus tried to put off would-be disciples by telling the story of a person who is thinking of building a tower - the sort of tower a farmer might put in the corner of a field to give him a look-out post from which he could protect his farm or his crops.

“Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’” (Lk 14:28-30)