

Cathedral sermon - Joshua 24

A week ago, in a bookshop, in a little market town, Mrs Hoyle saw a reissued ladybird book and exclaimed, 'I had that book'. It was a good and cheerful book called *Things to Make* and it explains why Mrs Hoyle has turned out the sort of person *who gets things done*. There were other ladybird books on the shelf and Mrs Hoyle's eyes narrowed, 'I bet you had those didn't you?', she said, pointing to a shelf of books about Richard the Lionheart, Captain Cook and Scott of the Antarctic. I did, I had them all, and that explains why I can't do a job unless it involves dressing up and a title. That and the fact that I am reading a novel by A S Byatt called *The Children's Book* has got me thinking about what children's books do to us. My first hero was a rabbit with wings called Pookie and then I think I read stories about a girl called Milly Molly Mandy an arch-conformist in a pink and white striped dress, but now the amateur psychologists amongst you are having a field day and I think we will move on.

There is a theological point to this, children's books, not the ladybird books perhaps, but lots of children's books bring us up believing that there is another world just out of sight and that, through the wardrobe, or with a flick of the 'subtle knife' you might go there or at any moment turn a corner and see hobbits or fairies, or the place where the wild things are. We are brought up to believe that reality might have layers. We begin by thinking you need imagination to really see the world and then we start to put aside our childish ideas. And doing that we may not be quite as clever as we think.

All this because of our first reading, from the Book of Joshua and. We are going to come back to children's books, the Book of Joshua, however, is *not* for them. It has two great themes, the first is a blood-curdling account of the battle the people of the exodus had as they invaded and occupied the land: the fall of Jericho, the defeat in the Valley of Achor and so on. The second is a very thorough account of which tribe is to get which bit of the Land and sounds like one of those documents that talks about the party of the first part and the party of the second part. Towards the end of the book however, the soldiers and the lawyers are all called to together, at Shechem, and Joshua reminds them that all this is done in the name of God. Without God, Joshua says, they would not have what they have; he reminds them of the great events through which God has guided them and comes to the obvious conclusion:

revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD

That's what we heard and then we heard the people say that God is indeed the God Joshua describes, the God:

who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery

And, they say,

we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God

It is stirring stuff and it sounds so positive, but I am afraid our reading sold us short. It stopped, dead, at the point the Book of Joshua gets really interesting. We ended with the people saying in nearly so many words, 'Three cheers for God who is indeed our God'. In the very next verse Joshua turns on them. Listen to this:

But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.

You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. That is not what they expected to hear at Shechem. You see, two really important ideas are in collision here. The first idea is that you can know about God. You can know about God because God does things, you can see where he has been, he reveals himself. That was what Joshua and the people agreed, they described what God had done. Huge passages of the Old Testament, and the New, are given up to this idea. You can know about the God who led the people through the wilderness and spoke the Law on Sinai, you can know about the God who goes out with armies and speaks to prophets, you can know about the God who is seen in Jesus Christ. That's the first idea; the *second* idea is that knowing about God is not the same as knowing who God really is. *You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God.* And great swathes of the Old Testament and the New are given up to that

idea: Moses standing bare foot at the burning bush, Moses who cannot look on the face of God because if he did, he would die, Isaiah who does not know what to say, Daniel falling on his face, Jesus declaring that he alone has seen the Father.

There is a difference between knowing *about* God and knowing who God *really is*. Let's go back to children's books. A few weeks Rowan Williams published a book about the Narnia stories written by C S Lewis and discovers there just what I have been trying to explain. Some of you will know the Narnia stories, some of you may not. Very briefly, Narnia is another world and just occasionally human children stumble into it. The creator and redeemer of Narnia is Aslan, and Aslan is a lion. In the story called *The Silver Chair* a girl called Jill has arrived in Narnia for the first time, she is desperately thirsty and she can see a stream of clear water. But, beside the stream is an enormous lion. The lion tells her that if she is thirsty she can drink. Jill does not move.

"Are you not thirsty?" said the Lion.

"I am dying of thirst," said Jill.

"Then drink," said the Lion....

"Will you promise not to — do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill.

"I make no promise," said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

"Do you eat girls?" she said.

"I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

"I daren't come and drink," said Jill.

"Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion.

"Oh dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then."

"There is no other stream," said the Lion

That passage is all about trying to understand God.

Now, one of the great themes of the Narnia stories is that Aslan is not a *tame* lion. He is good, we know that, but he is not necessarily safe. That idea is present in the passage I read to you, 'I make no promise', Aslan said. Jill want reassurance and gets none, she wants to tame the lion. But, Aslan cannot be anything but himself, he cannot constrain himself, he will never be *safe*. It is the point Joshua makes when he tells the people they cannot serve God because he is Holy. God is not like us, approaching God will always be risky and alarming because God will always be mysterious and God cannot be anything but himself. *And* there is no way but this way; there is no other stream. As an aside, you may have noticed in the gospel that some stopped following Jesus because his teaching was difficult and Simon Peter then made the great confession 'Lord, to whom can we go, you have the words of eternal life'. There is no other stream.

Theology sometimes, worship sometimes lets us think a little about God, see a little of his nature and it can tame him. In that process we all get tamed.

You see, in Narnia, the untamed Aslan overturns repression and constraint again and again. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* it is always winter and never Christmas, with Aslan's arrival festival suddenly breaks out. It is not just that he brings joy, it is something a bit more rebellious than that, all that is predictable and safe and certain is shaken off. When Joshua says 'You cannot serve God' this is a little of what he means. Even our best intentions fall short of God's generosity and grace, we attempt far too little, hope for too little. We tidy faith up. I do it to some extent in these sermons. Belief in God gets domesticated by too much definition; it ceases to be what it must be. The great truth is that God is not like us, not safe, not predictable, God is radically *other*. To be God's people we need to be the same.

As I said, there are difficult ideas at work here. Insisting that God is never safe, always mysterious it could sound as though I am saying he is just baffling and bewildering and as Aslan sometimes seems, rather magical. That is the wrong impression. We do know *about* God and we can be sure that God does obey his own laws. God will always be God and not willfully change into something else. I have spent years of my life learning theology; that is not a waste of time. I can know about God. What we can't do is define God tidy God away. God will always be holy, always difficult to serve.

Now, what do we do with all this? In part I have told you I hope a little about what an extraordinary passage in the Book of Joshua is driving at. But, there is a bit more to it than that. First, this extraordinary God who cannot be defined is always going to a God who needs to be worshipped before he needs to be understood. That's why this morning is so important. Our first duty, our first prayer is 'Thank you'. Don't let anyone tell you that religion is about being good, or clever, it begins and ends in worship. Here, now we are saying something fundamental about God and our relationship with God. Second, the God who obeys his own rules, but is never tamed will always be building a Kingdom beyond our imagining. When we talk about the Kingdom of God we have an unfortunate tendency to imagine something a bit like Clifton, with a bit more friendships and fewer security issues. God's Kingdom will always be more rebellious than that, the poor woman really will be Queen, the blind will see. And thirdly, we will need to remember that to enter this Kingdom we will need to be like children, imaginative, open to the most extraordinary possibilities. There is, perhaps, just a little bit of our theology that needs to be done in the back of the wardrobe, or through the looking glass. There should always be in faith a rising hope and an ability to imagine. It is perhaps part of the reason that it is children who are the heirs to the Kingdom.