

**Douglas Union with Frankfield**

# **Biblical Byways**

**Some less familiar parts of the Bible**



**A Daily Lent Course**

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## **Lent Course 2021**

If you turn to page 338 in the Book of Common Prayer, you will find a service written specially to be used on Ash Wednesday. The preface, at the start of this service, concludes 'I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Lord to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.' This simple pattern of daily readings and reflections is designed to help with the last part of that challenge.

This Lent Course is called 'Biblical Byways'. A byway is a less familiar or used route way, a minor road or path. When I was walking around the parish in January, I discovered some short cuts connecting different housing estates, which are not often used except by pedestrians. And so, this Lent I will take you to what are perhaps some of the less well known parts of the Bible which are interesting and fascinating in themselves. The material is deliberately short so it should only take you 5 minutes, but I hope it will sit with you for the rest of the day to encourage your own thoughts and reflections.

I have written this course with all of you in mind. We cannot gather to attend the usual mid-week and Sunday services in Lent this year. We are all missing not seeing one another. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot all commit ourselves to travel through Lent together. I hope you will enjoy these daily readings and be mindful of the fact that many others in the parish will be reading the same material as you are each day. You are on your Lenten journey with them.

Adrian Wilkinson



## Day 26 – Sunday 14 March

### Collect for Mothering Sunday (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent)

Lord God whose Son our Saviour  
gave his back to the smiters  
and did not hide his face from shame:  
Give us grace to endure the sufferings of this present time  
with sure confidence in the glory that shall be revealed;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

### Psalm 34:11-20

Come, my children, and listen to me;  
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

Who is there who delights in life  
and longs for days to enjoy good things?

Keep your tongue from evil  
and your lips from lying words.

Turn from evil and do good;  
seek peace and pursue it.

The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous  
and his ears are open to their cry.

The face of the Lord is against those who do evil,  
to root out the remembrance of them from the earth.

The righteous cry and the Lord hears them  
and delivers them out of all their troubles.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted  
and will save those who are crushed in spirit.

Many are the troubles of the righteous;  
from them all will the Lord deliver them.

He keeps all their bones,  
so that not one of them is broken.

## Day 27- Monday 15 March

### Introduction - Less heard stories of women from the Bible

Names are important for us all – they are part of our identity, first spoken to us when we are tiny babies. Without a name some of our identity is missing – we don't seem complete. In the Bible there are stories of many women, a great number without names- the woman at the well, the wife of Noah, the mother of Moses etc. I read a book recently called 'The word of the wives', fictional monologues from the wives of Zacchaeus, Pilate, Jonah and Solomon to name but a few. Entertaining reading but fiction!

Some biblical women are more familiar to us, the stories of Ruth, of Esther for example. As I looked at some of the names of women from the Bible, and I decided they had to be named to be in this study, I considered Queen Jezebel, Delilah, Rahab, Mary Magdalene, Anna and others – this could be a two week study, but I have chosen six women, showing six aspects of woman that have a message and relevance to us all today.

### Rebekah: The mother with initiative

#### Genesis 27:1-17, 27

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." He said, "See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. Then prepare for me savoury food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die."

Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father say to your brother Esau, 'Bring me game, and prepare for me savoury food to eat, that I may bless you before the Lord before I die.' Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savoury food for your father, such as he likes; and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies." But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, "Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing." His mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me." So he went and got them and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared savoury food, such as his father loved. Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob; and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and

on the smooth part of his neck. Then she handed the savoury food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob.

So Esau came near and kissed him; and Isaac smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him.

We start in the book of Genesis with Rebekah. Rebekah was the daughter-in-law of Abraham and wife of Isaac. She became his wife just after the death of his mother Sarah. In today's world, Rebekah would have been the entrepreneur, the initiator, the problem solver. Her story is full of times she took action to meet a need or solve a problem, yet the action was not always wise or honest. As we read about her, we can see how she took her actions (wise and not so wise) right to the heart of her life - her family.

We first meet Rebekah when she took action to draw water for Eliezer's camels. He had been sent to find Isaac a wife from the family homeland. It was good manners to respond to Eliezer's request for some water to drink, but to continue to fetch water for ten camels was beyond the call of duty, she saw a need, responded, and on hearing about Eliezer's quest she was willing to leave home and become the bride of a man she had never met - Isaac.

As a wife and mother of twins, Rebekah used her skills of initiative to ensure that God's plan would be fulfilled through her favourite son- Jacob. In the story we have read we see how she actually manipulated events so that he would overshadow his older twin brother Esau by ensuring he received his father's blessing. In today's language Rebekah might be described as a 'lawnmower mother' as she sought to smooth the path for Jacob's future.

We all try to justify the things we do in life, the decisions we make, the people we make connections with. This can be in our work lives or, like in the story of Rebekah, even in our home lives. We may also even consider that God approves of our initiatives. When we are making plans of action, do we genuinely seek for God's guidance or do we look for God's stamp of approval on our already decided solution? Can we balance our initiatives, our God-given skills and planning for today's issues with the wisdom that comes from God?

## Day 28 - Tuesday 16 March

### Shiprah and Puah: Front-line workers of their day

#### Exodus 1:15-22

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiprah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

Just before the story of the birth of Moses and the famous narrative of him being placed in a basket in the bulrushes comes a little-read story which forms the backdrop to the context of Moses's birth.

Shiprah and Puah and those who worked with them were actually responsible for saving the Israelite people. Without their dedication to their work, Moses would not have been born and the Israelites would never have been freed from Egypt and the Old Testament narrative would have been so different. I always wonder about these two women, how their names survived the centuries, imagining mothers telling these stories to children long before they were first written down. It is interesting that in the following chapter when we hear of the birth of Moses, a central figure in the Old Testament narrative, that his mother's name is not recorded.

Hebrew midwives, as midwives do today, helped the Hebrew women give birth and cared for their babies until the mothers were stronger. When Pharaoh told these midwives to kill the baby boys they delivered, it went against all their dedication and instincts. By saving the baby boys they saw themselves as following God. Two women, Shiprah and Puah, were doing their job on the front line 4000 years ago, and their faith in God gave them courage to take a stand for what they knew was right.

Today take a moment to pause and thank God for those who continue this work today (in these especially challenging times of COVID as frontline workers) as our hospital and community midwives. Also think of those whose faith in God has led them to be courageous and to take a stand for what is right.

**Day 29 – Wednesday 17 March**

**Deborah: Breaking the Glass Ceiling**

**Judges: 4:4-10**

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'" Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." And she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.

Watching Kamala Harris take the oath of office of Vice-President of the United States was a significant moment. We in Ireland have witnessed the inaugurations of Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese as Presidents of Ireland. These have been significant events for women, events which have often involved mention of the glass ceiling in the workplace for women.

The book of Judges tells the stories of the rise and fall of Israel, peaceful when they followed God and disastrous when they fell away. Today's story is of a woman who was a leader of the Israelite people – they were known as judges and the stories of judges such as Gideon and Samson fill this book of the Old Testament. Only one judge was a woman, her name was Deborah, and she was the fourth and only female judge of Israel.

Deborah was a wife, a prophet and a judge. She is introduced as 'holding court under the Palm of Deborah' with the Israelites coming before her to settle their disputes. She must have been an effective judge, bringing wisdom and mediation to arguments over land and property. She was also a good leader – she called Barak to defeat the army of Jabin. We don't know much about Barak, but he wasn't willing to go out himself and lead ten thousand warriors, he wanted Deborah to go with him which she showed herself willing to do, despite the dangers of battle.

The battle is won, the army defeated and its leader exterminated (also by a woman (Jael) and a tent peg!!- see Judges 4:17-22). Deborah doesn't take all the credit for herself as leader – she gives God the credit and the

following chapter is in fact a victory song by Barak and Deborah in which God's greatness is proclaimed.

Her story is one of leadership and of wisdom, breaking glass ceilings before glass was invented! Her legacy was significant- 40 years of peace.

Today, consider the women in the world in positions of leadership and pray for wisdom for them and for all who are called to serve in the government or in the judiciary.

## **Day 30 – Thursday 18 March**

### **Hannah and Mary: mothers with hearts of joy and sorrow**

#### **1 Samuel 1: 9-20, 24-28**

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer. They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord."

When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh; and the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, "Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in



your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.”

She left him there for the Lord.

Today we encounter Hannah. Hannah prayed fervently for a son as we have read. I always find this story hard to read as I think of people I know who have prayed in vain for a much wanted child. Even re-reading this story I find it unbelievable when Hannah gave her barely weaned son, Samuel to Eli at Shiloh, as his assistant.

Hannah only saw her child when they returned to Shiloh on their annual pilgrimage. ‘Each year his mother made a small coat for him and brought it to him when she came with her husband for the sacrifice’ ( 1 Samuel, 2:19). It is so hard to imagine how Hannah had to learn to let go of her son at such a young age.

Luke, in his gospel, has a favourite phrase when referring to Mary, the mother of Jesus, in her role as a mother. When the shepherds left the manger he says that ‘Mary quietly treasured these things in her heart’, and again at the end of the story when Jesus was left behind in Jerusalem as a young boy (a mother’s nightmare of her child going missing), Luke says ‘his mother stored all these things in her heart’. Mary was present at Jesus’ birth and at his death, she had seen him arrive as her baby son, treasured all the events of his childhood and life, and then suffered as Simeon had prophesied when she and Joseph had brought their young baby to the Temple ‘a sword will pierce your very soul’. She watched him die as her Saviour.

The stories of the Mother and Baby homes have been much in the media in the past few months. As we think of the stories of two biblical mothers today, we think in particular of the many mothers who never or barely saw their babies. There remain many stories of joy and sorrow treasured in mothers’ hearts.

Today, thank God for your mother and for those who have mothered you in your life, also pray for those who suffered and continue to suffer as a result of what went on in the Mother and Baby Homes throughout Ireland. Finally, pray for all who are new mothers at this time, for many happy events to store in their hearts.

## Day 31 – Friday 19 March

### Priscilla: Serving God in the Church

#### Acts 18:1-3, 24-26.

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.

You have to look closely through the book of Acts to find women as church leaders, but they are there to be found. In chapter 18 we read of a wife and husband team of church leaders called Priscilla and Aquila. Interestingly they are always mentioned as a couple, always in this order, and never separately.

Priscilla and her husband Aquila had been deported from Rome by Emperor Claudius and found themselves in Corinth where they met Paul when he was on his second missionary journey. Paul was a tent maker and Aquila was too, and so they worked together— this involved cutting and sewing goats' hair cloths into tents, many of which were used to house Roman soldiers. Living and working together with Paul must have really encouraged the couple in their Christian faith, they could also share with him what life was like for them as Christians in Rome.

They led churches, showed hospitality and mentored young leaders such as Apollos. The way they did this was gentle and encouraging. Hearing Apollos speak, they realised he didn't have the full story about Jesus, he was probably teaching the messages of the Hebrew Scriptures and the promised Messiah but didn't know about the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. They taught him what he needed to know but not by shaming him, but they 'took him aside' to do this, which showed respect and kindness.

They were a missionary couple of their day and are mentioned several times in letters of the New Testament, particularly by Paul. Here he says

in his letter to the Romans 'Greet Priscilla and Aquila. They have been co-workers in my ministry for Christ Jesus. In fact they risked their lives for me. I am not the only one who is thankful to them; so are all the Gentile churches. Please give my greetings to the church who meets in their home' (Romans 16).

The story of Priscilla and Aquila shows a couple who worked alongside people, both professionally (tent-making) and in church life, showing hospitality and kindness, willingness to travel and settle in new places and to serve God. Last year marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Ireland of the ordination of women as priests, we thank God for those who have served in our parish and for those who work as lay people alongside others in their workplaces, and those who have showed us hospitality in their homes, at parish events, and in other forms of ministry. Priscilla is remembered 2000 years later for doing precisely that.

## **Day 32 – Saturday 20 March**

### **Dorcas: Helping Others**

#### **Acts 9: 36-42**

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Our final story is also from the Acts of the Apostles, but in ways its story is universal.

Peter, who had been one of Jesus' closest disciples had been travelling and meeting believers in different villages not far from Jerusalem. He was in the town of Lydda when two men arrived with a request. They had heard that Peter had healed a man in that town and needed help for one of the believers in the nearby city of Joppa, located on the coast overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

Before Peter arrives we hear about Tabitha (whose name is Dorcas in Greek). The two names are probably because Joppa is an international seaport and many there would have spoken Greek. Dorcas is described as a believer, a follower of Jesus and was a real 'doer', always doing things for other people and helping the poor. Dorcas was a seamstress and when she died they laid her out with lots of coats and garments that she had made for others. It is amazing to imagine the widows, whom she had helped over the years, gathering the clothes she had made for them to display them in the upstairs room. Peter restored Dorcas to life and then called in all the mourning widows to show them that she was alive. The last verse is one of joy as the good news spread through the town. A busy, helpful and kind individual whose profile stretched far beyond her friends and neighbourhood.

We know very little about Dorcas, her age, whether she lived alone, whether she was rich or poor, but we all know people like Dorcas/Tabitha, and maybe more so in these times of lockdown when help is so important. It is lovely to reflect on the fact that she used her skills and talents to quietly help others, and to remember her name 2000 years later for simply doing that. There is a window in St. Michael's church that depicts her, complete with her scissors, needle, and thread. It is a reminder of her story and today we think of the stories of countless others who might not have been benefactors, explorers or inventors but were believers and helpers, showing kindness to the vulnerable using the skills they had. What simple task of service can you do today?