

Sunday 11th June 2023. Merciful intercession. Tom Yacomeni

Numbers 14 v 11-24

¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? ¹² I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.”

¹³ Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them. ¹⁴ And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, LORD, are with these people and that you, LORD, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵ If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, ¹⁶ ‘The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness.’

¹⁷ “Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared: ¹⁸ ‘The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.’ ¹⁹ In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.”

²⁰ The LORD replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked. ²¹ Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, ²² not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times— ²³ not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. ²⁴ But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it.

This week we are continuing with the next instalment of the Israelites’ Journey to the promised land which turns out to be a pivotal moment of great drama when the whole project hangs in the balance. Moses had sent 12 men out to do some reconnaissance in Canaan and they came back with a massive cluster of grapes from the valley of Eshcol, showing that the land of God’s promise was indeed a place of great fruitfulness and glorious potential. But then some of the group started spreading negativity as their fears surfaced. They shared exaggerated stories of the land devouring everyone who dared to enter and even rumours of indestructible Nephilim guarding heavily fortified cities. Only Caleb and Joshua held out and appealed to the people to trust in God and face their fears saying they could certainly go up and retake the land of their ancestors, because God had promised to go before them.

Sadly, our human weakness and insecurity means we have a tendency to dwell on fear rather than faith, so the people turned on the leaders and even considered killing them, preferring to go back to the way things were in Egypt and the land of their slavery. Moses and Aaron fell face down in front of the crowd whilst Caleb and Joshua pleaded with the people to put down their stones and not let fear dictate their response.

So then just at this moment of crisis, the Lord intervenes in a dramatic way. Verse 10 of chapter 14 says ‘Then the glory of the Lord appeared to all the Israelites at the tent of meeting’.

The Hebrew for Glory – *Cabod* - can be translated 'heaviness'. Cue cinema bass drop. Boom. The Israelites are caught red handed, stones in hand. This is serious. Everyone falls silent. We're just waiting for the hammer to fall.

And that is where our passage begins today – with an extraordinary moment of dialogue between God and Moses as the future of Israel hangs in the balance. Even more extraordinary is that God and Moses somehow seem to be switched positions. Moses stands up to plead for liberation and freedom for the people, whereas at the beginning of the story all he wanted was for God to send someone else. Moses is now showing not only concern for the people, but also zeal for God's glory and reputation. Moses has no concern for his own security, but he wrestles with God for the bigger picture. In the dialogue we see wrath, mercy, atonement and merciful Intercession all colliding, giving us a foretaste of what is to come through Christ who 'intercedes for us' at the right hand of the Father, according to Romans 8.

So why were the people so afraid to move forward?

God had promised to give the Israelites the land of their ancestors, where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were buried. A good land full of potential, an inheritance of abundance which would in turn become a blessing for all nations.

And yet the Israelites didn't want to fight for their inheritance. They were weary and traumatised. In their emotional exhaustion they forgot to hold fast to God and his grace. In that moment they preferred the option of returning to a life of predictable slavery than a fruitful life involving battle and victory. How often do we say to God enough is enough! There's no more fuel in the tank!

What we see in the Old Testament physically is often mirrored in the new Testament spiritually. 'Our fight', wrote Paul 'is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms'

For Christians the promised land is the place of spiritual fruitfulness where we grow the fruit of the Spirit - the fruit that changes communities and transforms societies. But sometimes it seems a bit too much like hard work to get there. We find ourselves kicking against God or returning to familiar dead-end ways or harmful habits. Why? Because we resort to fighting in our own strength without letting the Holy Spirit recharge our spiritual batteries. Spiritual burnout is a real danger which chokes the effectiveness of God's word in our lives.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus talked about the seed which fell amongst thorns – which grew up and choked the plants. He likened this to the deceitfulness of wealth and the worries of this life that chokes the effectiveness of the word of God to be fruitful in our lives. Mims and I have been fighting the weeds in the Rectory garden, but do we spot the weeds growing up in our own lives? What we have learned already is that it is best to nip things in the bud rather than let the thorns get established, but sometimes we need help to do that. The Israelites couldn't face the thought of battling for the promised land and for their inheritance, so they rebelled and rejected the gift that God had promised. They needed help. Cue Moses the intercessor.

The amazing thing is that even though the people were about to kill Moses, he prays for their forgiveness. Just as Jesus said on the cross, 'Father forgive them they know not what they do', Moses interceded on behalf of the people.

To intercede means praying to God on behalf of others, and the word literally means *go between*. God is seeking true intercessors who will stand in the gap, bringing people and their needs into the transforming presence of God. Every Christian is called to intercede on behalf of others. As Paul says in Ephesians 6v18 'pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people'. In Colossians 4v12 Paul talks about Epaphras: 'He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.'

To pray in the Spirit is to put down our own agenda and instead asking the Holy Spirit to help us pray according to God's will. In today's passage Moses actually seems to influence the will of God through his prayers. Now this opens up a whole can of theological worms... I won't comment too much on the whole debate between those who say God is immutable and his sovereign plans are fixed and the Open theists who say that God is open to influence because of free will. But suffice to say I do think somehow God is both Sovereign in the grand scheme of things and open to influence at the local temporal level. Prayer is God's way of involving us in the activity of the Spirit.

God is looking for intercessors who are willing to join in with his transformative work. But he wants more of them! In Ezekiel 22, God laments the lack of anyone willing to contend on behalf of the nation: 'I searched for a man among them to repair the wall and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, so that I should not destroy it. But I found no one.'

God wants more people who will seek his heart and character and somehow contend for his Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. People who are willing to fight and give encouragement to those who are weary.

God has set things up in our universe such that our prayers enable his power and forgiveness to flow. As we learn to pray for others we ourselves are transformed in the process. We see Moses' development on the journey to the promised land as he was transformed from murderer to intercessor. We see Caleb and Joshua showing that both older and younger generations are also called to grow in wholehearted faith.

Moses stood in the gap to plead for forgiveness for the people, which is Jesus' instruction to us as disciples: 'If you forgive anyone their sins' Jesus said to the disciples, 'then they are forgiven.'

Intercessors are people who know God's character and wrestle for blessing and reconciliation. Yesterday I read from 2 Samuel 14v14 a verse that I have never seen before: 'Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die. But that is not what God desires; rather, he devises ways so that a banished person does not remain banished from him.'

Intercessors remember that God devises ways to bring reconciliation – both with God and with each other. Moses had God's heart when he pleaded on behalf of the people. God is calling us to pray for people to be reconciled to him.

Think of it as pedals on a bike. When one person is feeling weak, another is strong and can pray and move things forward. When they have a rough day, the other can take over. That is why we need to pray for each other and carry one another's' burdens.

In a book about Rees Howells who had a particular ministry of intercession during the War and saw great revival in southern Africa, Norman grub writes that there are three main things to be

seen in an intercessor which are not necessarily found in ordinary prayer: Identification, agony and authority.

Intercession starts with identification. Just as Jesus 'was numbered with the transgressors', Moses identified with the Hebrews and despite their fear and anger pleaded for them when God's wrath was roused by their contempt.

The wrath of God is something we don't like to talk about very often. We would rather concentrate on the Love of God – which is only right because God is love, right? But when we deliberately turn our back on the Lord and his commands, the wrath of God comes as an inevitability. As our society turns its back on God and his ways, looking only for human solutions to human problems, things will inevitably unravel further. The wrath of God comes as he gives people over to their own selfish ways. Without seeking God's forgiveness and redemption, which requires humility and a healthy dose of the fear of the Lord, our sinful nature will eventually multiply and give birth to death.

Intercessors feel the agony of growing suffering or separation from God so they cry out to God for mercy, forgiveness and redemption.

My Godfather was an intercessor who would sometimes wake up and find himself praying about a situation, sometimes an international incident. He prayed for me too and I am grateful to all those who have prayed for me and my family over years.

Finally, intercessors pray with authority, because they grow in their experience of the character and presence of God. Moses spoke out the word of God that he had received on Mount Sinai v18: 'The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...'

Jesus took our punishment on himself on the cross, so that we can be forgiven of sin and guilt. As we pray and intercede we bring every situation to the foot of the cross. We invoke the love and redemption of Christ instead of destructive rebellion. We learn that there is power in the name of Jesus to break every chain and demolish every stronghold.