

## **Brancepeth Sermon: 'Choose this day'**

### **Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity**

**Mike Higton**

Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18

Psalm 34:15–22

Ephesians 6:10–20

John 6:56–69

*Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.*

*Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,*

*that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

I want you to begin by imagining the scene  
from our Old Testament reading.

I want you to imagine that you are there, at Shechem, amongst  
the elders, the heads, the judges, the officers of Israel, for one  
last address from that wiry old soldier, Joshua.

The veteran of endless campaigns,  
he looks like he's lived his whole life in army camps.  
He's 110, and his body looks like it's made  
of coat-hangers and old leather,  
and yet he still gives the impression that  
he could wrestle any one of us into submission  
with one arm tied behind his back.

He looks around at all of us,  
fixes us one by one with an evaluating stare, and says,  
*'Choose this day whom you will serve.'*

Imagine yourself there.

Actually, hang on: no, don't.

*Don't* imagine yourself there.

There are all sorts of messages I might want  
to pass on to you this morning,  
and I'm really not sure that Joshua's is one of them.

This is at the end of his life, after all his campaigns,  
and Israel is now at peace, more or less –  
but if you read the whole set of speeches  
from which our extract comes,  
you'll see that Joshua is still in war mode.

He knows that there are still enemies all around;  
or rather, he knows that there are still *foreign peoples*,  
still people who have not been dispossessed of their land –  
and he sees them as an enduring *threat*.

'*Choose this day whom you will serve,*' he says:

choose whose side you are on: ours, or *theirs*.

Whatever you do, make sure you don't intermarry with them;  
make sure you don't get *infected* by their culture.

If you get the chance, kill them – kill them all.

God will wipe them off the face of the earth in front of you  
if you give him a chance.

‘The Lord your God will push them back before you,’

he says in the previous chapter,

‘and drive them out of your sight;

and you shall possess their land.’

‘If you turn back’, he says,

‘and *join* the survivors of these nations left here among you,

and *intermarry* with them,

so that you marry their women and they yours,

know assuredly that the Lord your God

will *not* continue to drive out these nations before you;

but they shall be a snare and a trap for you,

a scourge on your sides, and thorns in your eyes,

until you perish from this good land

that the Lord your God has given you.’

Joshua, the old campaigner, the old ethnic cleanser,

has blood on his hands –

and he’s not the remotest bit abashed by that.

There’s still blood to shed, and his only regret

is that he has not had a chance to shed it all.

So why would I want you to imagine yourself there,  
to imagine yourself getting *that* message,  
to imagine yourself urged to take sides  
*against your neighbours* like that?

So, no, *don't* imagine yourselves at Shechem,  
standing listening to Joshua.

If you begin to hear Joshua's voice in your head,  
*drown it out.*

Except – *that's* not good enough either.

This passage is there on our reading sheets.

It's there in our Bible.

We heard it read out here in church,

and when we heard the reader say,

'This is the Word of the Lord',

we all replied 'Thanks be to God.'

Refusing to hear it wasn't really an option.

What are we to do with the fact that  
Joshua and his campaigns,  
and his insistence on division and on violence,  
are there in our scriptures?

Well, in a different context, we could look at how  
in the rest of the Old Testament, this message is taken up,  
questioned, qualified, and turned around.

I don't want you to go away thinking,  
'Well, that's the angry Old Testament God,  
so let's focus on the New Testament instead!'

No, there's *plenty* in the Old Testament to say that  
this is, at very least, not the whole story;  
that God is not actually a God  
committed to this kind of injustice,  
this kind of violent destruction,  
this kind of separation of peoples.

There's more than enough in the Old Testament,  
to say that there's something partial,  
something distorted  
about taking this on its own as a portrait of what God wants,  
or as a recommendation for who we should be.

I'm going to take a different approach, though.

Because there's a traditional Christian response  
to stories like the story of Joshua.

And it's not just the response of squeamish modern critics;  
you can find it right back in the early centuries of the church.

I've been reading about one example this week:

Augustine, the North African bishop and saint,  
writing back in the fourth century AD.

He said that when you come across passages like this,

and don't know what to do with them –

when you can't see how they can possibly fit

with what you know of the good news of God's love –

well, your task is *not* to make peace with

the literal sense of the story.

Your task is not  
to work out what on earth God was up to  
if this was what God was saying and doing back then.

Your task is not to come up with a rationale for  
why it was okay for God to order all this violence,  
all this separation.

No, what you have to realise is  
that God has given you these stories in your scriptures  
because God wants you to fight a *different* kind of fight.

In our reading from Ephesians, Paul sets this out:  
'our struggle is *not* against enemies of blood and flesh,  
but against the rulers, against the authorities,  
against the cosmic powers of this present darkness,  
against the *spiritual* forces of evil in the heavenly places.'

So we *are* involved in a battle, yes – a real battle –  
but it's not a battle against our human neighbours,

it's not a battle where we need literal swords,  
literal breastplates and shields,  
where we're going to shed literal blood.

It's a battle where we need the belt of *truth*,  
the breastplate of *justice*,  
the sandals of *peace*,  
because we're fighting the forces of falsehood,  
we're fighting the power of injustice,  
and we're – the irony is sweet – we're fighting violence.

So, with *that* in mind...

Okay, yes, you *can* imagine yourself at Shechem.

Joshua standing in front of you.

It's quiet; it's easy to think it's peaceful

but Joshua – the man can never stop fighting –

wiry old Joshua reminds you that this is still enemy territory

This is still a world, a country  
occupied by — racism,  
infested with — sexism,  
a country that is held captive by —  
astonishing levels of inequality;  
a country awash with worship of the young and fit,  
where the disabled, and the old are often sacrificed.  
This is still, Joshua says, enemy territory.

And then he looks around at all of us,  
fixes us one by one with an evaluating stare, and says,  
*‘Choose this day whom you will serve.’*

So, yes, imagine yourself at Shechem.  
Or, better — imagine yourself at Capernaum, by Galilee,  
facing another Joshua —  
because our Gospel reading was about  
someone with the same name: Joshua, Yeshua —  
but this Yeshua is the one whose name we know  
in it’s Greek form — as *Jesus*.

And he too is looking at you and saying

*‘Choose this day whom you will serve.’*

He’s been deserted by many of those who were following him,

and he turns and says to the twelve,

‘Do you also wish to go away?’

You need to choose which side you are on.

Jesus is God’s response to our broken world.

His life, his words –

they are God’s firm ‘No’ to the way of the world,

God’s firm ‘No’ to lies, to injustice, and to violence.

And Jesus is God’s ‘yes’ to truth, to justice, and to peace.

He proclaims them, he lives them out,

and he calls us to join him.

So we are faced with a choice:

We can choose to share his life –

as he put it, we can choose to eat it, to take it as our food,

to be nourished by it, to grow into it.

Or we can turn away from him;

we can turn away from that life.

There's no middle way

We have to choose *this* day whom we will serve –

every day.

We need to keep on, day by day, deciding to share his life,

to eat his flesh and drink his blood,

to commit ourselves to following *his* way, not *the world's* way

*'Choose this day whom you will serve.'*

And for us, amongst many other things,

that will mean choosing *not* to live the kind of life

shown in the literal story of Joshua.

In a country with racism on the rise,

where nationalism and fragmentation are rife,

where refugees are vilified,

we have to choose *this* day whom we will serve.

Day by day, we have to choose the *belt of truth*:  
so we have to choose not to let casual racist talk slide past us,  
still less to join in;  
we have to choose not to indulge in nostalgia  
for a mythical golden age of white Britain;  
we have to choose not to believe the lies that  
get spread about immigrants, about refugees –  
and perhaps not to buy the papers that spread them.

We have to choose each day the *breastplate of justice*:  
to turn our faces, our wallets, our votes  
against any who think that other people don't deserve  
the same protections, the same peace, the same resources  
as we enjoy  
because of where they were born or how they came here.

We have to choose each day the *sandals of peace*:  
to refuse the temptation to think that we will be safer,  
that we will prosper and flourish,  
if only we can build the walls around our community  
high enough – if only we can keep others out.

So, yes, imagine yourself at Shechem,  
transfixed by the stare of Joshua the warrior,  
or imagine yourself at Capernaum,  
facing that greater Joshua, Yeshua, the Prince of Peace,  
and

*‘Choose this day whom you will serve.’*

Amen.