

Joshua 2:1-15
Faith in unexpected places

Have you done any research into your family tree? It's become quite a passion for lots of people and quite an industry since it featured on TV. *Who do you think you are?* has become essential viewing for many people as we watch celebrities discover something about their ancestors. We've watched Jeremy Paxman discovering that his family grew up in Glasgow tenements in the poverty of Victorian Scotland; we've watched Brian Blessed as he discovered part of his family going into the poor house and one by one dying of disease; we've watched Matthew Pinsent – directly descended from God, they said, but that was just “medieval propaganda”, but he does have connections with William the Conqueror. But he also discovered difficult things in his family tree: he discovered that his great-uncle was a tank commander at the Somme who committed suicide after the failure of his assault on German lines; there can be disturbing discoveries and lots of them when you begin this research.

If we do same for Jesus' family tree, there will be no disturbing discoveries like that anywhere, will there? Yes? No! There are two versions of Jesus' family tree in the Bible, one in Matthew and the other in Luke, but there are bits common to both. There are the great Old Testament heroes like Josiah, David, Abraham and such like in Jesus' family tree; that's grand; that's what we'd expect of the family history of the Son of God coming into the world. But then there are a few other characters: Manasseh, was king for 55 years, but was full of evil, was a bad king for Judah; then there's Rahab from Joshua chapter 2. There are a couple of things about Rahab that are important to understand: first of all, she is a foreigner; perhaps a native of Jericho. But she is certainly not a Jew and how big an issue that is for Israel. Secondly, she is described as a “prostitute”, a woman of dodgy moral character – how can she be in the family tree of the Son of God, but there she is; Rahab is an ancestor of Jesus through Boaz and David. The grace of God is at work in the most surprising places!

We meet Rahab as she welcomes the spies. Joshua has sent these spies into Jericho because he wants to see the task in front of him; the two men crossed the river and went to see what the land was like, what the city was like. Rahab's house was built into the city wall, though how the spies got there, we have no idea. As we said earlier, she hid these spies and protected them from the city guard; she hid them on the roof of her house, under bales of flax and then sent the guards on a wild-goose chase, telling them that the two men had already escaped. Rahab not only appears in Jesus' family tree, but she also appears in the list of heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 and, as we read, appears as an example to Christians everywhere of faith in action. Let's look a little more closely at Rahab and her faith.

“I know...” (Joshua 2:9ff) This is her confession of faith. She speaks of herself as well as for other people in the city. “This is what we think; this is what we believe!” They believe that the God of Israel is a great God, *“God in...” (Joshua 2:11)*, a way of describing the greatness of God. The God of Israel is greater than their own gods and is greater than any other gods of which Rahab has heard. Because of what they believe, here is their reaction: *“a great...” (Joshua 2:9b)* God is great and now they are afraid; the God of Israel is greater than any other gods and now they are afraid of what this God, and the people of this God, will do to Jericho and its people. Rahab knows something of God, and what she knows and what she believes creates a reaction in her heart and mind; she knows and she believes and she acts on her faith. It is not the most obvious place to find someone with faith in the living God of Israel.

It all began by hearing the stories of what God has done: *“we have...” (Joshua 2:10)* and these stories have been the seed of her faith. She heard that God has dried up the Red Sea and His people crossed in safety; she has heard about Sihon and Og, two kings whose story is told in Numbers 21, two kings who tried to stand in the way of Moses and the people on their journey to the Promised Land. Moses looked for safe passage on condition that they would do no damage but Sihon and later Og refused and were defeated in the battle that followed; two kings defeated by the people of God by the power of God at work. Rahab has heard these stories; Jericho has heard these stories, and they have believed them. They believed the stories and so they believed what the stories said about God; for

many people that created fear; for Rahab it created faith – she believed the stories and she believed God. She believed God would help and save her.

Evangelism is about telling stories. We tell people the stories of Jesus, the things that Jesus has done in His life, death and resurrection; people hear these stories and the seed of faith is planted in their hearts. Some churches are forgetting to read the Bible in Church; they present it in other ways, but the plain reading of the Bible and its stories has an impact on people's lives that we can never quite grasp. We moved our Bible reading to earlier in the service so that our children and young people can hear the Bible being read. People hear these stories and ask questions of them; they want to know more of these stories and, much more importantly, they want to know more of the Jesus about whom these stories tell us. If someone came to you and asked you to tell them what Christian faith is all about, the best thing you can do is suggest they read Mark's gospel; they will read about Jesus, His story, what He has done and then they can react to Jesus and some will believe and some will walk away. Evangelism is all about telling stories and allowing the Spirit of God to work in the hearts of the people to whom we tell them. There was no Bible in Jericho; there were no priests; there was no temple, but the people had heard the stories of what God had done and the Spirit worked in their hearts to create faith.

“By faith...” (Hebrews 11:31) Rahab believed God and when the opportunity came along, she put that faith to work to help the people of God. Two spies appeared at her door, two Israelites sent by Joshua to spy out the land and she looked after them. She hid them; she protected them; she lied for them – she's not perfect, but Bible commends her for her faith, not for telling lies. By looking after the spies, she declared her faith in the living God, the God of Israel, even to the danger of her own life; if she had been caught with these spies, she would have died, so there was a risk, but she was willing to take that risk and put her new-found faith into action. Her faith found its reward: she and her family were saved when Israel destroyed Jericho, saved by the red cord hanging from her window! Into her messy, imperfect life, with faith that is nowhere near perfect, comes the grace of God and Rahab is blessed.

Rahab is an example of faith in action, there alongside Abraham; that's exalted company for her! *“In the...” (James 2:25)* What she did was evidence of her faith. She believed God and she put that faith into practice by caring for the people of God. *“Faith without...” (Jas 2:26)* That is such a strong statement; it does not say “faith without actions is mildly lacking somewhat”; no! Faith without action is dead! A healthy body has a healthy appetite; we eat well when we are healthy; but the same healthy body then burns off the calories that we have taken in; our bodies need that exercise in order to remain healthy. We are spiritually healthy when we have a healthy appetite for the things of the faith, and we read the Bible, pray, and come to worship – our faith is fed by these things; then we need to burn off the calories by putting our faith into practice. We put faith into practice by the kind of people we are, that we live in Jesus' ways, as His disciples, being the right kind of people; we put our faith into practice by loving and caring for other people; we put our faith into practice when we take part in activities in the life of the Church, or be involved in other Christian work of some kind. There are all kinds of ways by which we put faith into practice; each will find our own way; what is most important of all is that faith goes to work.

Rahab heard what God had done; she believed these stories; she put her faith in God. She put her faith into practice and sheltered the spies. She is not the most obvious hero of the faith; she is not the most obvious life-example. But there she is: a hero of the faith; an example to Christians everywhere of faith in action; a place in Jesus' family tree; her prayers answered! The Spirit of God is still at work in our world; we still meet surprising people drawn to us by the Spirit; we still find faith in the most surprising places. Our job is to tell people the stories of Jesus and let the Spirit work in their hearts and minds. We have a story to tell, a life-giving story; people need to hear about Jesus from us. We also have a faith to put into action; we show our faith by the things we do, and people see Jesus in us.