# Joshua and Rahab

So Moses left the people on the bank of a river. Jimmy Cliff once wrote a song called “Many rivers to cross” in which he described the experience of facing river after river on our life’s journey. He sees himself as kept alive only by the will, surviving, but alone, and not sure of ever finding the way to the other side. At different stages of life we stand at the banks of particular rivers ‑when we leave home, or move house, or go to college, or marry, or divorce, or change careers, or retire, or die. In my work in theological education I am aware that college takes people from one side of a river to the other. It is very obvious that this is the case for people who are going to be ordained. They come to college not because they want to, but because this is a barrier the church makes them cross if they wish to reach the church’s ministry. The only way to get to the other side is by wading a river. Joshua and company of course had the benefit of a miracle to take them across, and sometimes we may be inclined to reckon that only a miracle will take *some* people across *their* river. But most people have to wade across for themselves, at a time when it is very obvious to them that the river is in flood. When Israel crossed the Jordan, it was in flood, and one wonders why God took them across at such a silly time of the year, though then wonders whether that is typical of the way God seems to work with us. The water comes right up to your neck one way or the other and threatens completely to overwhelm you, to carry you away. We do survive the swim, and in a strange way we may be quite affectionate about the experience afterwards. It was what took us from being one side to being the other side. We reach the place we wanted to be, the place God had called us to. The swim was worth it, and what we learned in those waters we will never forget.

## Living in the light of God’s promise and of God’s command

When you stand at the bank of the river, to judge from Joshua’s experience there are two things that God suggests that you keep in mind. Your crossing and your life the other side involve living in the light of God’s promise and living in the light of God’s command.

God begins with a command: it is time to get going across this river. But as soon as the command is uttered, like God’s original command to Abram it gives way to a series of promises: I am giving you this land, every place your foot treads on will be yours, no one will be able to stop you, I will be with you, I will not fail you or forsake you. Then it is commanded again: be strong, be courageous, be very careful to follow the Torah, meditate on it, do not be frightened or put off by anything that confronts you when you cross the river. And it closes with a promise again: Yahweh your God will be with you wherever you go. God’s words raise issues about the nature of life in the light of God’s promise and in the light of God’s command, and about the relationship between these.

‘Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I promised Moses.” It is an odd way to put it. You first put your foot down somewhere. There is a vast land that God points to, a land far broader than actually Israel ever controlled. God does not here designate particular places within it or lead you to particular places. *There is* all this land, says God. Now put your feet down somewhere. And when you have done that, say “God has given us this bit. It is what God promised Moses.” You do not know precisely what lies the other side of the river, precisely what God is calling you to. You do know that God has designated a vast area as the land of promise, and that you explore it as a land God gives you.

‘As I was with Moses,” God says, “so I will be with you.” Admittedly that gives you food for thought. As God was with Moses? So you get given impossible tasks, put under stress, pressured, misunderstood, and rejected by people . . . . “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you.” We have noted already how it is always worrying when God says, “I will be with you.” It is a promise that always belongs in the context of some frightening expectation; you have to evangelize the world or you are about to give birth to the Messiah. Mary knew what she was doing when she became so troubled when the angel appeared and said that God was with her. She knew that something horrendous was about to follow. But at least you have that promise. When you are about to cross the river and you have no idea what lies on the other side, God says “I promise you it will be OK. I myself have been there before, I will give you your inheritance there, I will be with you.” We live in the light of God’s promise.

Joshua is also called to live in the light of God’s command, in the light of the Torah which Moses gave the people. The English translations use the word “law” for Torah, but that makes it sound legalistic. Perhaps “rule of life” gives a better idea of the significance of the Torah for Israel. It is something to guide them, something to measure themselves by. It is a way of life ‑that is the image that is cashed out here. Sin is a matter of wandering or waywardness or going astray. There is a clear path to walk in, says God. So walk in it.

The command seems very general, though it is probably a little less general than it sounds. When God refers to the Torah Moses gave Israel, it is a reference back to Deuteronomy. The Book of Joshua is the beginning of a vast story which extends through Judges, Samuel, and Kings and traces (among other things) how far Israel did or did not order its life by the expectations laid down in Deuteronomy (it is a “Deuteronomistic History’). It is striking that the key concern of Deuteronomy is faithfulness to Yahweh rather than following other gods. Here is Israel entering a multi‑ethnic, multi‑faith context like ours, and it is warned to keep its rule of life, to keep its commitment to Yahweh, not to slide away from it under the pressures of a multi‑faith society. It is one of the central issues for the church in the contemporary world as it was one of the most important issues for Joshua’s people to get dear on, how to live in a multi‑faith context without wandering from a commitment to the fact that Yahweh is God, that Jesus is Lord, that there is only one way.

How *do* you make sure you live in the light of God’s command? “This book of Torah is not to leave your lips,” says God. That will likely seem rather strange to us. God is not talking about preaching but about Bible study, about meditation. You study scripture with the scriptures on your lips. It is not a head trip but something that involves the body in the very studying, ‑ so that it then involves the body in the obeying. Joshua would approve of the custom encouraged by Scripture Union and by the lectionary systems of some churches whereby one reads the scriptures systematically day by day. He would add an exhortation to let the scriptures possess the whole person ‑ body as well as mind.

Live in the light of God’s promise and live in the light of God’s command. I am struck by the way those invitations are interwoven in what God says. The relationship between them is tricky, and maybe people vary about which they most need to hear. I was once in a conversation about preaching. I had said that I thought it was much more important in preaching to talk about the grace of God, or the promise of God to put it in the terms of this passage, than to talk about our obedience to God ‑ I reckoned that if you got grace straight, obedience would follow, and that preachers were too fond of giving congregations a kick in the pants to get them to be more committed, when what they really needed was to believe that God loved them.

The person I was talking with commented that she thought she did believe that God loved her and that she did need a kick in the pants. That made me wonder whether there are two kinds of spirituality, whether some of us are people who are convinced that God loves us and that things are all right, so that what we need is to be goaded into action, and others of us are people who are never sure whether God does love us and are always active because we want to prove ourselves to ourselves or to God (the two are related to the Abraham‑Moses polarity noted in the last chapter). And I am the latter kind of person.

That may be partly because I am a man. Certainly it is the case that some feminist writers suggest that the besetting temptation of men as men is always to be active, assertive, aggressive, trying to discover them­selves, whereas the besetting temptation of women as women is to be relaxed, content, unassertive, not feeling the need to discover themselves. Like most generalizations it will not always work, but it corres­ponds to some bits of experience, like the fact that it is often men who dominate discussions and arguments and make it difficult for women to get a word in edgeways. Perhaps one bit of agenda from God for any Christian church or community is to get the relationship right between relaxing in God’s promise and actively living by God’s command, and helping each other to see where individually and corporately we need to do something (or do nothing) about that.

## Joshua behaves like a man and is rescued by a woman

“Live in the light of God’s promise and live in the light of God’s command,” Joshua is told. So what does he do? He behaves like a man, but fortunately is rescued by a woman, and learns a spiritual lesson or two from her. He is encouraged also to live in the light of what God has done for Israel in the past, and to live in the light of what God has done for us personally.

Joshua sends two men secretly from where Israel is encamped at Shittim to take a look at the land, and particularly at Jericho. Why? Presumably to discover Jericho’s strategic situation, its strengths and weak­nesses, so that the Israelites can attack it in due course. But that is odd, because they are not going to attack it. They are only going to march round and blow trumpets. A choir practice would be more logical preparation. So here is Joshua seeking some reassurance that everything will be OK, which he does get. But why is he seeking it? Is that not what he has just been given by God?

Of course I am being hard on Joshua. Yet look where his initiative leads. He sends the spies *secretly.* But the King of Jericho evidently has his own intelligence system, because he finds out about them. Their lives are in danger. They have gone inside a walled city, night has fallen, the gates are shut, and they are caught like mice in a trap.

Then there is the particular place in Jericho where they were reckoning to stay, the house of a prostitute called Rahab. Now it may be that Jericho was a little like the Wild West, where the saloon, the hotel, and the whorehouse are the same place. Perhaps there is only this one place for the spies to spend the night. But it is still a pretty odd place to find two nice Jewish boys. Their lives were not the only thing they were in danger of losing.

Yet it would not be the fact of being in a house of ill-repute that would most trouble an Israelite. The hint of the real problem lies in the place we have been told they set out from, Shittim. When the Israelites had arrived there the men had got involved with the local women and been invited to their religious festivals (we must be open to learning from other people’s faiths in a multi-religious, multi‑ethnic context, perhaps they thought), and they had joined in the worship of the Baal of Peor and antagonized Yahweh. Here they are at the other end of the time at Shittim walking straight into the same mistake. There was that one priority in Israel’s rule of life in the promised land, keeping your religion pure, and it is already imperilled. So God says “Be bold, be faithful, and you will begin a long life in the land.” But they need some evidence if they are to be bold, and they risk their commitment to Yahweh and imperil their lives altogether.

Now the story does not labour all that, but simply hints at it. Once again we discover that the Hebrew Bible isn’t moralistic the way Christianity is. It is capable of shrugging its shoulders when believers do the wrong thing; it does not always underline it. This may be because it believes in God, whereas Christianity is inclined to put all the burden on us to bring in the kingdom. The Hebrew Bible reckons that is God’s business, so it can be more relaxed about our failures. That is why I like living in the Old Testament. This Joshua makes mistakes. Confronted by the river, know­ing the promise of God and the command of God, he stops trusting, compromises his commitment to God, and puts everything at risk. It is so encouraging that he did that, and that because he and we are both surrounded by Yahweh and the angels, we need not worry overmuch. In my small way I have to act as a Christian leader, and one reason I could sometimes wish it was not so is that I make mistakes. It is wonderful that God is not frustrated by our mistakes.

The result of Joshua’s mistake is that these young men are sitting on the sofa with Rahab, wondering what happens next, when there is a commotion in the street, then banging and shouting two doors away. It is a gang of heavies from the palace. “Any strangers here tonight?” You knew you should not have been here. It was a stupid mission. It was the wrong place to be. And you are going to pay for it with your life. Because obviously Rahab will give you up.

But no! “Quick, up on the roof,” she says. The roof, of course, was a bit like the back garden and the outhouse for us, it was the place you hung the washing and kept things. There was flax for dressmaking laid out to dry in the sun. It was a place they could hide.

Then when the heavies get to the door, there is an amusing conversation. “Hi, guys, welcome, what can I do for you? How long can you stay? Wouldn’t you like to lay down your arms and surrender to mine? O yes, there *were* two foreigners here. No, they didn’t say where they came from. They just stayed an hour and left. You’ll probably catch them if you move. . .

## Living in the light of what God has done

The whole story would make a splendid Whitehall farce ‑ the naive young Jews, the blundering soldiers, the prostitute with a heart of gold. I imagine the Israelites laughed every time they told the story, until it got stuck in plate glass in the Bible. But the best funny stories are profound and serious at the same time, and this is one, because from it the Israelites learned how to live in the light of what God had done for Israel in the past, and how to live in the light of what God had done in their own experience.

For why did Rahab change sides? Sociological reasons probably played a part. It is easy for men to fantasize prostitutes and think they must all be nymphomaniacs, sex goddesses. In the city where I live, and in Jericho, a prostitute is more likely to be someone on the margin, someone who could not make ends meet, someone in trouble, someone who had to find a livelihood and for whom this seemed the only way, someone whom the community fails and then uses to provide a facility and then despises and (in our society’s case) criminalizes. That is why it was no chance that Jesus made friends with whores and that they responded to his friendship. It gave them a fresh start in a community that did not operate with the values of the old community that had failed them, used them, and despised them.

So it is no coincidence that Rahab is the person who changes sides. She is the person with nothing to lose. It *was* a good idea to stay at the whorehouse. The God of Israel is the kind of God who reaches out to the marginalized, and they can tell that the God of Israel is their kind of God. When Jesus started with whores, he was as usual only doing what he had learned from the Hebrew Bible. Indeed it was in his blood. One of his ancestors had been a prostitute. A scarlet thread links Tamar and Rahab (compare Gen 38:18,28 with Josh. 2:15,18,21). The whorehouse *was* just the place the spies should have expected to be welcome ‑ not just as customers but as bearers of good news, news that God has exalted the lowly and brought down the mighty.

When people talk about mission, one of the things they sometimes say is that we do not go out into the world as if God is not there, we go in the conviction that God is there and is involved and we go to try to find out where God is involved, to get stuck in alongside and reap the benefits. So sometimes one will speak to someone about Christ and be amazed at the way God has been preparing the way. I recently met a woman from *Peru* who had come to join a team witnessing to *Jewish* people in *Britain* and who got into conversation with an *Italian* with whom she had to speak in *Spanish* (because Italian and Spanish are fairly similar)and whocame to know Christ. It is extraordinary how God can make things work.

Two spies went to the wrong place for the wrong reasons and found God was there. There is no hint that they gave their testimony in the brothel. They found the madam giving them hers. There they were hiding among the stalks of flax on the roof, humiliated by the Canaanites, the exact opposite of what was supposed to happen. Rahab comes up to see them as they are getting ready for bed and wants to talk about God. “I know that Yahweh has given you this land and that we are all scared stiff of you, because we have heard how Yahweh dried up the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and we have heard what you did to the peoples the other side of the Jordan. We are all petrified of when you cross the Jordan, because Yahweh your God is God in heaven above and here in this world.” That is why Rahab changes sides. There never was any future for her in Jericho. She wants to live in the light of what God has done for Israel.

It is a wonderful irony. If Joshua had been prepared to do that, the spies would never have been hiding on the roof of a brothel in Jericho at all. Not living in the light of what God has done for Israel has got them in a near‑terminal mess. But it is all right, because the God who dried up the Red Sea to get the Israelites out of Egypt is not going to be put off by a triviality like that from getting them into Canaan. So Yahweh does something extra for them, scaring the pants off the people of Jericho and providing them with a nice lady to tell them all about it. She thereby shows them that she realizes that she needs to live in the light of what God has done for Israel, and that they ought to be doing so too. And thus in addition she shows them that they can also live in the light of what God has done for them personally, shows them how to link their story onto God’s story, shows them that God’s acts are not just in the glory days of the past but in the sinful present. They have failed to live in the light of what God has done for Israel, and as a result they experience God doing something for them.

Back on the roof Rahab has completed her testimony. “Right, come on you two, no time for sleep now.” “But we’ve paid for a bed for the night.” “Do you want to die or not? Time to move it.”

Now we have noted that it was past nightfall and the gates were shut. There was no way out. But as it happened Rahab’s house was set into the city wall and she had a window looking out. She lowered a rope toward the ground outside and hurried the young men down. Jericho has the Judean hills (as they will one day be called) one side and the River Jordan on the other, and Rahab had sent the troops towards the river, in the direction of the Israelite camp. So now she whispers down to the two men as they clamber down the rope, “Go and hide in the hills till the coast is clear.” “OK. We’ll be back though. Leave the rope hanging out of your window. Then everyone will know it’s your house and that you’re on our side.”

Thus they made their excuses and left, made their ignominious exit, and hid in the hills till things quietened down. Then they crossed over to the camp and told Joshua all that happened to them ‑ which must have raised some eyebrows. But they were able to say to Joshua, “The people over there are scared stiff. It really is true that Yahweh has given the land into our power.”

They have learned from God that they are to live in the light of God’s promise and to live in the light of God’s command. They have learned from Rahab that they are to live in the light of what God has done in the past for Israel, and to live in the light of what God has done for them personally.

All the time we spend wondering whether we can cross the river or are actually wading it, we must keep these things in mind.