



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

17th November, 2023

...because of the course you are taking, the honour will not be yours...

Judges 4:9

It was said of Margaret Thatcher that she was the best man in the cabinet. She was certainly a formidable personality, whatever we think of the politics. The same may be said of Deborah, our 'walk-on' character for this weekend (Judges 4 and 5). She was a prophet and leader ('judge') of Israel for 20 years, from around 1316 to 1296 BC, -counting backwards, of course... and the dates are 'guesstimates'! (This is a different Deborah from Rebekah's nurse in Genesis 35.)

After some settled times under previous judges (3:30), *"the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord. So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, king of Caanan"* (4:1-2). Judge Deborah purposes to pull self-government back to Israel, which would involve a battle, and she calls upon Barak to lead an army. Although the Lord had promised victory (v.6-7) Barak seems to get 'cold feet', or maybe he recognises the charismatic effect Deborah, as prophet and leader, would have on the army, because he says, *"If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."* So she goes, but tells Barak *"...because of the course you are taking, the honour will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman."* (4:9). Well, it's a gory battle, but suffice to say that at Deborah's command (v.14) Barak's 10,000 men advance and the enemy is wiped out. Barak himself doesn't seem to do much except chasing them (I may be doing him a disservice!).

Deborah's song (Judges 5) doesn't hold back in self-recognition *"Village life in Israel ceased... until I, Deborah, arose, ...a mother in Israel."* (v.7). The song ranges widely through the tales of battle involving Israel's tribes and heroes, -but praise and glory to God is woven through the song.

There's another interesting thing about Judges 5:7. It could be translated, *"Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back until I, Deborah, arose, a mother in Israel."* It puts a different slant on Deborah as judge and leader. Clearly her leadership, her presence, her charisma, her integrity inspired and empowered not just Barak, but the nation. We may think of our late Queen and other female leaders in world history and scripture. Highly significant people of God.

So it is a sad footnote to the story, that when the Hebrews writer lists the heroes of faith from Israel's history (Hebrews 11) Deborah is missing, although her reluctant army commander, Barak, is mentioned. Despite Deborah's prophecy (Judges 4:9, -which the Hebrews writer must have known), Barak *does* get the honour! Hebrews 11:32-33: *"...I do not have time to tell about Barak, and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms..."* Poor Deborah, airbrushed from the history!

Why a woman whose leadership was so significant should be uncredited in favour of her male 'underling', is open to interpretation. It may also cause us to reflect that there are still some individuals, churches and Christian organisations who struggle to acknowledge -and empower- women as equally gifted and called by God for leadership.