

## **Sermon: The fall of Jericho**

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9 July 2017

Joshua 1:1-9

Matthew 12:13-21

For the past century the land of Israel has been a modern state. For the 2 thousand years before that it was called Palestine, named by the Romans. For the thousand years before the Romans it was the Jewish nation of Israel. And for over 8 thousand years before that it was Canaan. I heard on the radio this week a geologist talking about how for 12 000 years the earth has had a stable climate, a sweet spot, not too hot, not too cold, that allowed crops to grow and biodiversity to flourish. Geologists call it the Holocene, and warn that we are rapidly destroying it. It gave birth to human civilization, including there in Canaan. It all happened there, the invention of the wheel, pottery, agriculture, coinage, trade, jewelry, weaponry. The Canaanite civilization centred on several major cities up the Jordan River valley, the only route between north and south. Jericho held a prime location, just north of the dead sea. From there you can go west to the coast, south to Egypt & Africa, east into Jordan or north to everywhere else. It also had fertile plain, and a spring right inside the city walls. And of course it had walls.

Here's the spring, with its sign: Jericho, the oldest city on earth. It's also the lowest, well below sea level.

And here's one of Jericho's inhabitants, he's called Lulu and he reluctantly agreed to give me a ride!

Behind Lulu and the pretty spring is this: the ruins of Jericho's walls.

The great, prosperous, inassailable city of Jericho fell to an attacking army. It had a HUGE wall. As you can see, the wall had a base of stones skillfully stacked tightly together, and on top of the stone base they had piled packed earth, to raise the height of the wall. Inside the city was big, really big, with complex structures, storehouses, institutions and homes. It had been unassailable for centuries, even millenia, secure inside its wall, well stocked with food and supplied with continuous source of water.

The story in scripture seems bizarre, ever magical. How could a bunch of poorly armed, desert-starved, escaped slaves from Egypt possibly take a highly advanced wealthy fortress with such impossibly high walls? They could hardly have looked like much of a threat, walking round and round outside.

And yet the archaeological evidence is that something catastrophic did happen to the city of Jericho, possibly involving an earthquake.

Now you folks know all about walls falling down in earthquakes.

What do you think might have happened to all that dirt packed on top of the wall in a strong earthquake? Yeah, it would have tumbled outward. And if this happened to happen just as an enemy was attempting to take the city, the enemy could then simply walk up ruins of the wall. Here's how it is described in Joshua 6:

*<sup>20</sup> So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it.*

The archaeologists found that when the walls fell the people were killed, and a great fire burned everything to the ground. And, just as it says in the Bible, the site of that great Canaanite city has never been occupied ever since.

There's another curious detail in the story that I saw to be true.

Rahab the prostitute lived inside the wall. We visited another ancient Canaanite city, a place called Tel Balata, where the walls are still intact. Can you see the holes? These are not missing stones, these holes were built into the construction, windows for the hollow space between the inner and outer walls of the walls, a space big enough to be a home, and the windows were big enough to squeeze out of, if you weren't too chubby!

The archaeology gives good evidence of what the Bible describes, the settlement into Canaan by a new people group, called the Hebrews, around 1250 years before Christ. They won battles against some tribes and integrated with other tribes, and by the year 1000 BC they united under a king called David as the nation of Israel.

The fall of Jericho has a significant place in our scriptures as the first of the conquests, the sign that God would fulfil his promise to give them the land by delivering their enemies into their hand. In taking out the Canaanite opposition at Jericho the Hebrews were able to enter the land and gain a foothold from which they spread and conquered.

There's only one problem (actually there's more than one problem, but here's the first one). Jericho was already in ruins by 1250 BC. It was actually destroyed about 1400 BC, while the Hebrews were still in slavery in Egypt. Who destroyed Jericho is still something of a mystery, but several other of the Canaanite cities were also burned and slaughtered about the same time. The archaeologists think it might have been a bunch of marauding Egyptians, out to slash and burn and steal.

It seems that the book of Joshua rather overstates the case for how grand and effective was the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews. The book of Joshua would have us believe that

- a) God promised all the territory of Israel exclusively for the Jewish people, and
- b) God gave them complete victory over all other inhabitants of the land, and,
- c) God explicitly banned any contact between the Jewish people and all other people in the land; they were not to make any peace treaties or agreements of any kind.

Can you see why this is kind of a problem for Israel today? Can you see why it matters for us as Christians to understand the claims of the book of Joshua, and to come to our own point of view about these claims. Because if you try to impose these claims on the land of Israel today you find yourself in breach of all manner of international conventions and in violation of modern ethics.

There are Christians today who uphold the exclusive claim of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, confident that God promised them the land and no one else has the right to live there. I am not one of them.

The evidence of archaeology is important, because it shows that the Jewish people never actually conquered all of Israel. Despite the picture that Joshua gives, the Jewish people actually were forced to get along with their neighbours and find ways to co-exist.

Where all this leaves us, then, is with some mis-matches, some points of disconnect:

There is a disconnect between the history as described in the Old Testament, and the history as described by archaeologists.

There is a disconnect between our understanding of God as a loving Father, and prince of peace, and how God is described in the book of Joshua as demanding the slaughter of thousands of innocent people.

There is a disconnect between our hopes for Israel today, how important we know it to be in world politics and how important we believe it is for peace treaties to be made and upheld, and the politics of the book of Joshua which calls for exclusive ownership of the land on the basis of armed conquest and divine promise.

How do we live with this? How do we as Christians address these deeply rooted points of tension? There is only one answer, and that is Jesus Christ. He is the one who entered the divide. He is the one who stands in the gap. He is the one who makes sense of history. He is the one who showed us the Father in all fullness and truth.

Jesus came, as Matthew puts it, as the servant sent from the Father, filled with the Spirit, a man of gentleness and justice, who will not break a bruised reed.

Jesus came redefining our categories of friend and enemy.

Jesus said, over and over, love your enemies. Jesus said, forgive others the wrong they do you, over and over again.

Jesus deliberately related with non-Jewish people, a woman by a well in Samaria, a Roman officer, determined to show that God's concern stretches far wider than those who claimed exclusive rights to God's favour.

And Jesus came redefining our categories of territory and ownership. We humans fight to protect what is ours or to claim what we want to be ours, but Jesus turned this on its head. "My kingdom is not of this world" he declared. Jesus is King and Lord, but not of a land. As Christians we do not have a kingdom made of bricks and walls, but we are sent into all the world to proclaim the gospel.

The gospel is that Jesus Christ is victorious, that he has won the victory, over sin and evil and death. But his is an upside-down victory, won over death through death, won through sacrifice, great power through great vulnerability. We who are in Christ are poured out as he was, lambs among wolves, because we share in his victory, and in his name and his power we claim new ground for his kingdom. We stand as broken and healed people in no power but his. We have no need to attack others, or to defend ourself, because Jesus Christ is victorious and we are inside his victory. And so walls will fall.

I do apologise. I have raised questions this morning that I have not answered. The issues around the historicity of scripture and how we apply the Bible to modern politics will go on indefinitely, hardly to be resolved by me in one sermon. I have grappled long and hard with the question of how Israel can both be the Promised Land of the Jewish people and home to people of other faiths. I certainly don't have any easy answers, but I am utterly convinced that Christians have a key and vital role to play in finding those answers. Why? Because I am convinced that the person of Jesus Christ is utterly central to peace in Israel. He was both Palestinian and Jew, and yet he completely redefined both those categories, and his kingdom is neither Palestinian nor Jewish.

And so we pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and Jericho, and we pray for those who work for the peace of Israel. And as we do we share with countless others all around the world.