

## Sermon, St Botolph's, Cambridge

Preached at Mattins on the Second Sunday after Trinity, 10th June 2018

### Joshua 2

“And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts did melt.”

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

It was about eight years ago when my mother returned home from an ordinary trip shopping with an unexpected addition to the family. Despite leaving the house under the guise of fetching bread and milk, she in fact came back with a Jack Russell. My father was less than impressed by this extra impromptu canine mouth to feed. When questioned what on earth it was she was doing, my mother simply replied that she had only gone in to refuel her car but had seen the animal there waiting to be sold at the petrol station and, in her words, ‘my heart just melted’.

We imagine hearts to be odd, flexible things. Do they break or do they melt? Is the heart, as the prophet Jeremiah has it, deceitful above all things or is it to be trusted, as Jean Jacques Rousseau counselled, above the head? Hearts are now, of course, associated very squarely with how we *feel*. Each of those figurative examples imply a weight and importance to the heart in the emotional sphere that goes quite beyond its physiological function of pumping blood around the body. The irony of much of our heart language, from the cold, literalist medical perspective, is that were our hearts to actually break or melt or deceive or seize the reigns of control from our brain in some sort of bodily coup d’etat, we wouldn’t *feel* anything at all, because we’d be dead.

Of course, the heart has had its challengers as the primary figurative receptacle for our emotional highs and lows. Modern psychoanalysis has sought to shift the emotional repository of each and every memory and emotion to the brain and we still, of course, talk about our gut feeling. The bowels have, perhaps fortunately, been toppled from their position as an organ of feeling. Oliver Cromwell is not a man whom I am given much to quoting, especially not from the pulpit, but his exhortation to the Church of Scotland in 1650- “I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken” - is not as blasphemous as it may first appear, referring as it does to what were considered a central part of the physiology of emotion in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

Our lesson from the Book of Joshua today, however, shows that the primacy of the heart in these matters is long established. There is a tangible climate of fear and trembling that pervades the tale of the men hidden by Rahab the Harlot. Fear that the two men might be discovered, fear on the part of the King of Jericho that his city has been infiltrated, doubtless fear as Rahab tells her virtuous lie to save the lives of her would be conquerors and, above all, fear of God. One can almost sense the hearts beating double time throughout the passage- it is a thriller worthy of John le Carré. Yet this is not fear in the sense of that mechanism that operates in agoraphobia or arachnophobia; rather this is a pulsating awe at the majesty and wonder of God. It is a fear that melts hearts, it is, in short, a fear that has much the same effect as love.

Jericho is and was a synonym for pride, for a city and a society that thought, that thinks, by its own petty machinations it might forestall God, might be bigger and better than God. It is telling therefore, that the one citizen that recognises the great purposes of God is its lowliest, the harlot. And how does she relate that which causes her to overcome, to put aside the pride of the whole city; she relates the clear faithfulness of God to His promises made to Israel. She relates that the constant evidence of the commitment to God to His people is what causes there to no longer be courage remaining in the hearts of proud Jericho. Even Jericho, mighty Jericho, is left trembling by the awe of the promises God is determined to keep.

Love and fear are, therefore, inexorably intertwined- especially when it comes to God. The fear and trembling with which Rahab relates her decision to help Joshua's men has the tokens of God's love of Israel at its source. Similarly, the fear with which even the demons expelled in our lesson from the Gospel according to St Mark demonstrate comes from an acknowledgement of Godliness- "Thou art the Son of God" they cry. If faith in the power of the promises of God can melt the hearts of mighty Jericho, if it can drive out demons, then how much more might it be a force present in the lives of we who gather to worship the living Christ today?

The religion that we see presented in Holy Scripture today is not one of mere sentimentality or of emotion- be that emotion vested in heart, head, or even bowels. Rather it is a faith of such power that it can deliver the proudest city of them all into the hands of those only just released from slavery, it can break and bend the staid rules of Sabbatarianism, it can turn a harlot into a heroine. The faith our lessons show us, our faith, is one of power.

Humans are always scared of that which we cannot control, over which we have not power. Why is the heart 'deceitful' as the prophet says? Well, because often our hearts lead us whither

we may not want to go. Often they melt against our will. What we fear is a lack of control over our own words and deeds and actions- acting in a way that is against our rational predisposition, acting, as if we are in love. This is why this love of God is so intertwined with fear- the Love of God removes the sensibilities of time and place- it cancels the Sabbath. It removes the sensibilities of scientific rhyme and reason- it restores the withered hand to wholeness. It removes the sensibilities of human order and expection- it makes, after all, the harlot the heroine. We so often despise it not because of its sentimentality, because of its weakness, but, on the contrary, because we know its power.

Few things are less popular in this latter day Jericho than the surrendering of power. The West pays no greater homage to anything than it does the cult of the individual, the cult of self stands triumphant. We like to do what we want, when we want and, above all else, we value the ability to control what we do in a way that we see fit. The value of those other, lesser gods, such as money and fame, is, of course, their ability to grant access to that great idol of absolute control over own lives. The idea of God is especially dangerous to such idols because, by fear and by love, the one who was before we were and will ever be, exerts a control beyond the ages. Across the ripples of space and time, God calls us to a deeper and truer loyalty than that claimed by the cult of the individual. This call may, amid the Babel sounds of this Jericho (to mix my Biblical city metaphors), sometimes seem faint, but it is inexorably there. And just as the far off tales of the glories of God swayed Rahab the Harlot, so we are here today to testify to the power, the truth, the glory of that inexorable call to know and love and fear God that we feel in our lives.

‘Hearts do not break, they sting and ache, for old love’s sake but do not die’. So sings Katisha in her surprisingly moving Act II aria in Gilbert and Sullivan’s Mikado. The hearts of this land, this society, this Jericho have not totally broken, there is still a memory of the old love of God. Indeed they sting and ache for the joy of the gospel. It is our task as Christians, in awe and wonder, faith and fear, to go forth and melt those aching hearts with the great, overflowing love of God once more.

‘And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts began to melt’. If we live in an age where a Jack Russell might melt a heart, then how much more must this Jericho be crying out for the fearful and transformative story of God. Let us go forth and tell it.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

AMEN.

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