

Trouble with a Tribe

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 6th of October 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Trouble with a Tribe and is based on Judges chapters 17 and 18.

And you may like to have open in front of you the Pew Bibles on page 205. And for those who are here visiting today, we've been, over the last few weeks, looking at the book of Judges and this is the second last in our series from this book.

Some strange stories in this book. One of the books on Judges I was reading during the week said, who on earth would ever want to preach on this when you can preach on Philipians? And last night I agreed. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, you speak to us in all sorts of different ways and through the ages, your words to us come to us now in the Scriptures. We pray that as we come to these chapters in the book of Judges, that you will give us not only clarity of understanding, but also that we will submit to your way and live your way for your glory.

[1 : 25] And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Probably Frank Sinatra summed it up best of all when he sang, I Did It My Way.

It's a song of our age and not infrequently at funerals, usually of non-Christians, I get asked if they can listen to or play the music, I Did It My Way, at the end of the service.

But it could well be a song for ancient times as well. I Did It My Way. That is, I determine what is right for me. You determine what is right for you.

You do it your way. That's fine. I'll do it my way. What's right for me is right for me. And nowhere is that slogan, I Did It My Way, more the case, both in our day as well as I think in ancient times than in the issues of religion.

Take Tamsin for example. She likes Eastern Buddhism because she likes the quiet, the calm, the sense of peace that she gets, the individualistic meditation.

[2 : 29] She doesn't have to engage with other people and so on. And she says, well you've got to choose what works for you. This works for me. It's right for me. You choose what's right for you. That's okay. Well Barry's way was a bit different.

He'd occasionally say the Lord's Prayer or the Rosary. He might carry around a lucky charm or some Christopher medal or something like that just in case. He'd go to Christmas.

That was a bit of added security just in case. And his life was pretty much okay, he said. So it seems to work for me. It's right for me. If you want to be more involved, that's fine.

Now Thilma, she was a bit different again. She'd read her horoscope. She had her lucky numbers. She'd never have a dinner party where there were 13 people at the table. She'd never stay on the 13th floor of a hotel.

In fact, many hotels don't have 13th floors anyway. She was always careful of ladders and black cats. And because her life was largely okay and things had generally gone all right in her life, she felt that she'd got it right.

[3 : 31] It was right for her. Right numbers, right horoscopes and all that sort of thing. So she stuck with it. Now Wilf went to the cathedral.

He loved the sense of awe, the tradition that a great big building like the cathedral had. It made him feel good. It was right for him, he said, to go there. Oh yeah, he'd drift off during the sermon and during the prayers and most things.

He liked looking at all the plaques on the walls and the gargoyles up in the high bits of the cathedral and so on. He liked the choir's anthems usually, but he'd never go if it was modern music. Not my thing, he said.

I'll do what's right for me. Well, for Jim, he was the opposite. Any song that was more than 20 years old, he wouldn't sing. Had to be modern, flashy, multimedia, modern music.

That's cool. That's my way. I did it my way. The theme of our post-modern individualistic age. Always equally valid.

[4 : 33] My way's right for me, your way's right for you, that's fine. Don't encroach on my territory, I won't encroach on yours. You pick what's right for you, I'll pick what's right for me, doesn't really matter, they're all equally valid.

As the Nike slogan says, just do it. But there's actually nothing new in post-modernism. I did it my way is the story of ancient Israel as well.

It's the theme of the book of Judges in many respects. Not that Frank Sinatra's little slogan, I did it my way is there in those words in this book. The way this book expresses it is as in chapter 17 verse 6, all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

That's the slogan of our age, it's the slogan of ancient Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And what a sorry place it was.

We've seen that already through this book. Cycle upon cycle of Israel falling into sins of idolatry and immorality, rescued by God's grace by raising up a deliverer, but as time went on, a deliverer who was more and more compromised in faith and morality, more and more a fool.

[5 : 46] And now we come to the end chapters of the book where we see the morass and mess that Israel has fallen into. Now chapter 17 actually begins on a positive note and we may well be excused for thinking now at last the people of Israel have got something right because it begins with a story of a man who confesses a sin, repents of his sin of theft and returns the money that he's stolen.

And we could well think at last Israel's getting it right, at last they're turning from their sins, repenting of them, making good and coming back to God's laws. The man is prompted it seems in returning his money because he stole it from his mother and he hears his mother issue a curse on whoever has stolen the money and for whatever reason the man is prompted to return it to his mother and he receives his mother's delighted blessing at getting the money back.

But this is not a turning point for people of Israel. their lives are not becoming repentant and full of good things now. The man returns 1100 silver pieces that he'd stolen, a huge amount of money and the mother when she receives them back it seems consecrates them to the Lord and so we would expect all 1100 pieces of silver then to be used somehow in the Lord's service.

But what in fact happens? She consecrates the silver to the Lord and gives it 200 pieces to her son to make an idol of cast metal.

That's hardly consecrating money to the Lord. And what happens to the other 900 pieces? It seems she just hangs on to them. So she makes a vow to consecrate all 1100 pieces but actually only uses 200 and then what is used for them is for her son to make an idol nothing to do with God at all and he makes we're told an idol of cast metal.

[7 : 54] He also has there an ephod which is either some precious garment that a priest would wear or perhaps it's another form of statue or idol and he has a teraphin I say when I first read this word I used to think of things like turtles or tortoises teraphins but it's probably some ancient statue of a god or an idol we're not quite sure and this son of this woman who'd stolen the money but now returned it sets up these cast idols in his own house creating his own personal shrine and he installs his son as his own personal priest.

That's in the first few verses of the first paragraph of chapter 17 and the writer's caustic comment about this is there was no king in Israel all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

They did it their way. Now in the remainder of chapter 17 the fortunes of this man who's created his personal shrine with his own idols with money that he'd originally stolen get better because after some time a man passes by who happens to be a Levite.

Now the tribe of Levi was one of the twelve tribes of ancient Israel and they were given a special role earlier in the Old Testament to be the priests for the nation.

They didn't live in a geographically separate tribal area but were to live throughout all the tribes of Israel acting as the priests for the tribes in the areas to which they went.

[9 : 40] This Levite it seems for some reason is looking for a job. That doesn't suggest good things in the people of God. He's come from the tribe of Judah. Maybe he doesn't like the people in Judah.

Maybe he's looking for a better job. It certainly seems in these two chapters that he's motivated by money. Anyway he passes by the house of Micah the man who set up his own shrine with his own son as a priest.

And when Micah realises that this man is a Levite that is if you like a proper priest it seems that he sacks his son probably sends him out to do the dishes or something and makes this Levite an offer that he can't refuse.

So he says to him in verse 10 be my priest and I'll give you ten pieces of silver a year a set of clothes and your living. And the Levite priest accepts the offer.

He's bought by the money that he's offered not what the ancient Levite priests ought to have been motivated by. And so chapter 17 ends with Micah saying fairly safely securely and complacently now I know that the Lord will prosper me because the Levite has become my priest.

[10:55] Christ. Now consider all the things that are wrong in this chapter. The mother has withheld money that she consecrated to the Lord, broken her vow in effect, kept back some money for herself for whatever reason and in effect by making a vow to consecrate it to the Lord and not actually giving all the money that she's consecrated to the Lord has actually taken the Lord's name in vain breaking one of the Ten Commandments.

The son, Micah, firstly he makes idols of cast metal and that is precisely what the laws earlier in the Old Testament explicitly forbid.

The exact words are used here for what Micah does as is what is forbidden in earlier chapters such as in Deuteronomy 27. But it's also important to see that what he does is not just what's forbidden but what actually attracts the curse from God.

Deuteronomy 27 begins a series of curses and this is the first one of them. Cursed be anyone who makes an idol or casts an image anything abhorrent to the Lord the work of an artisan.

And that is exactly what Micah does. Ironically he's received his mother's blessing for giving the money back to avoid her curse on the thief but he actually stands under a more severe curse, the curse from God for creating an idol.

[12:33] He's infringed the first two commandments and he's compromised the uniqueness of God by setting up an idol. But also he's set up his own shrine and in doing that he's infringed the laws of the earlier part of the Bible as well where the places where you go to worship were strictly limited by what God has chosen not what people choose.

He's also broken the earlier laws by setting up his son as a priest when his son presumably does not come from the tribe of Levi since they're living in the area of Ephraim.

And then the priest, he seems to be in it for the money, not for the ministry. He's on the lookout for a better job, a job with more pay and so he's hired by Micah's offer.

And then finally in this chapter Micah's hope for prosperity which he expresses in the last verse of chapter 17 when he says, now I know that the Lord will prosper me because the Levites become my priest, shows that he has a commitment to an external form of religion but is completely ambivalent about where his heart lies.

So long as he's got a Levite priest, that is one that's in a sense official, he must be right and prosperity will come to him from God is what he thinks.

[14:00] But it's little more than superstition. I did it my way sums up the actions of this man Micah. He's doing what is right in his own eyes.

Throughout the book of Judges we've seen over recent weeks the repeated failures of leadership. Judge after judge, leader after leader is a compromised character, immoral or foolish, an idolater, a failure, a killer of a daughter.

And each successive cycle of events in this book cries out for the right leader, the proper leader, to lead God's people in the ways of God.

And when every judge arrives, we're meant to think, is this the person? And by the end of the cycle we realise they're not, they're in fact worse than their predecessor. In these last chapters of the book of Judges that cry for good leadership is expressed by saying, in those days there was no king in Israel.

It was there back in chapter 17 verse 6. It's there in chapter 18 verse 1. We'll see it again next week as well. Not just that any old king will somehow be right for the people, but ultimately it's a cry for godly kingship by the writer of this book.

[15:23] Now the story in chapter 18 picks up the threads of chapter 17 but it adds another dimension to show how widespread the failure of God's people was. one of the 12 tribes of Israel,

the tribe of Dan, each of the tribes was named after one of the sons of Jacob back in the book of Genesis.

One of the tribes, the tribe of Dan, is homeless. In effect they're refugees. They're looking for a new homeland, a new territory. Now we may well be responding initially with pity and sadness.

Here's a poor tribe of Israel, they haven't got land and in the end of this chapter they get some land which is nice land. But if we understand the events of the preceding book of the Old Testament, the book of Joshua, we realise that the reason why the tribe of Dan has not got a land to live in is not because somehow they've been overlooked and we're meant to have pity on them.

It's because they've failed to trust God and obey him and therefore they were unable to take the land that was originally allocated to them in the time of Moses and then his successor Joshua.

So the reason why the tribe of Dan is looking for land is because of their own failures in not trusting God and obeying him. Well the tribe of Dan sends out five spies to find some land.

[16:47] The land that they'd been unable to take, that God had given to them in a sense, was way down in the south of the land. These spies go through all the land of Israel looking for land and they end up way in the north, beyond the tribal boundaries of the northern tribes to a town called Laish.

Initially they sent out five spies to find out where to go. The five spies found this land, they said it's good, the people there are pretty unsuspecting, will easily beat them and so they decided to rally the tribe together and all of the tribe of Dan, 600 of them armed, plus the spies and so on, set off north to take the land of Laish.

And when they got there in the very north of the land, almost into Syria, where the land of Aram with its capital Damascus, not far from there, and probably under some jurisdiction it seems of Tyre and Sidon, which is modern Lebanon, they come to the people of Laish and rout them.

Now after all the bloodshed of the book of Joshua and Judges, with the various defeats of enemies of God's people, we may well think, well this is just one more where the people of God are getting the land that they should have.

Is there any problem? And yes there is, there are many. There is a problem because Dan should have taken land earlier where God had given it to them.

[18:13] Yes there is a problem because the land that they're now looking for is outside the bounds of the promised land that God actually allocated back in the time of Moses and Joshua it seems. And yes there is a problem because they ought to have offered peace to the people of Laish before they conquered them but they didn't.

And yes there is a problem because in all of this conquest of this land by the tribe of Dan there is not one mention of God fighting for them which is consistently the pattern when God gives land. Here they're acting outside of God's will. And yes there is a problem because their victory is over a defenceless unsuspecting people. That's emphasised in chapter 18.

We're told it a couple of times at least that the people of Dan are quiet, peaceful, unsuspecting, they've got a nice land and they're defenceless. Their allies are probably in Sidon and that's a long way away and they have no alliance with Aram or Damascus which is nearby.

And so they are left in effect defenceless and the tribe of Dan easily beats them. So we read at the end of chapter 18 the Danites in verse 27 having taken what Mike had made and the priest who belonged to him came to Laish to a people quiet and unsuspecting put them to the sword and burned down the city.

[19:33] There was no deliverer because it was far from Sidon and they had no dealings with Aram. It was in the valley that belongs to Beit Rahob. They rebuilt the city and lived in it. They named the city Dan after their ancestor Dan who was born to Israel that is Jacob but the name of the city was formerly Laish.

And there is also a problem with this because in taking this land the tribe of Dan carried with it idols, false gods.

They weren't taking this land in the name of Yahweh the true living God but they carried with them idols. Because in the middle of chapter 18 which I've skirted over, on the way to the land they come to the house of Micah from the previous chapter.

And the spies originally had met the priest. In fact they'd asked the priest whether God would bless their mission to find land. And the only mention of God in chapter 18 comes from the word of this mercenary priest who says the mission you're on is under the eye of Yahweh.

But knowing what we know of the priest from chapter 17, I think we're meant to think that is not the case and God is not mentioned anywhere else in the chapter. When the people of Dan as a whole come to take the land they come again past Micah's house to his priest.

[20 : 58] And this time they surround the house with their 600 armed men and they go inside and they make to the Levite priest in the house an offer he can't refuse. Why just be a priest to Micah?

Micah will do you a better deal. Come and be the priest for a whole tribe. And of course he takes it on. He's motivated by money and probably prestige who wouldn't want a bigger responsibility.

And so he goes off with them. Not that he had a lot of choice because the house is surrounded by armed men. But he seems to go willingly and not only that he takes with him all the idols that were there in the shrine that Micah had made.

Micah actually goes after them and catches them up as they're going on and he complains about what's going on. It's quite ironic because Micah began by stealing money and now things have been stolen from him.

His comeuppance has come about. Well they actually threaten Micah. They say hey if you're going to kick up a fuss here there might be some big blokes who will come around and do damage to you and your family. So Micah shuts up.

[21 : 59] He realises they're more heavily armed and he beats the retreat back to his own house and that's the end of Micah. So the tribe of Dan when it takes this land sets it up with an illegitimate shrine.

They've got idols which they ought not to have got. They've got in effect a mercenary priest not one that's meant to be how the priests of the Old Testament were. And we see then the spread of immorality and idolatry amongst the people of God.

It's not just there in Ephraim. It's not just there in Judah where the priest had come from it's there with the tribe of Dan as well. We see here a mercenary ministry, a syncretistic shrine.

We see superstitious superficiality. We see moral compromise. We see a religion of convenience. They did it their way.

Now they may well have thought that life was okay. They've conquered some land. Micah was going okay in the early stages of chapter 17. And maybe that's a sign of God's blessing. But this story has just a little hint that that is not quite the case for the tribe of Dan.

[23 : 13] Oh, we've seen justice done to Micah. He loses all his idols and priests. But we're told at the end of chapter 18 that the tribe of Dan maintained as their own Micah's idol that he'd made.

And in verse 30 that the priests that they had were to the tribe of the Danites until the time that the land went into captivity.

That's a few hundred years later, 721 BC when the Assyrians conquered the northern part of Israel. But it's a hint that you cannot practice idolatry in the end and get away with it.

You cannot practice having God and all sorts of other gods as if they were to row on your mantelpiece and get away with it. And it might look for a while that somehow you've received blessing because you've conquered the land.

It's a nice land. It's got everything there. The people are aish, they're gone. You've renamed it.

You've settled there. Very nice. Very comfortable. Nice little skiing place up the hill, Mount Hermon. But in the end, God's the judge.

[24 : 19] And that little hint that they had those priests until the captivity warns us that they do not ultimately get away with it. See, in the end, religious relativism is ultimately fatal and moral relativism is ultimately fatal.

That is, I'll do it my way, you do it your way, it doesn't matter which way we do it, it's all valid, is folly. Because ultimately the last judge is God. And so for the tribe of Dan, they went into captivity some hundreds of years later when God judged them.

Now, of course, we in our 21st century, we're not quite so crass as Micah and Dan to have our little statues of metal or wood or whatever on our mantelpiece that we bow down to worship.

But the idolatry of our age is just as deathly and just as abhorrent as it was then. And like ancient Israel, God's people, we, God's people, are just as vulnerable to the practices of idolatry as they were.

See, it's easy to try and manipulate God. To think that somehow a nice worker, a good worker, a generous offer or some religious devotion will somehow manipulate God to win about God's favour for us or to attempt God to do what we want him to do.

[25 : 36] It's easy to try and manipulate God, especially by a commitment to the externals of religion but that has a heart that's devoid of devotion. So, so long as we seem to be doing the right thing and it's all done in decency and good order, then surely God is going to bless us and make us prosperous.

But that's little more than religious superstition. It's easy to be mercenary in motivation, to withhold money like Micah's mother, to be willing to do ministry for money like Micah's Levite priest or to be driven by a desire for money like Micah who stole in the first place and was keen on prosperity at the end of chapter 17.

And when ease and prosperity come our way, it's easy to sit back complacently and think that somehow God is blessing us and our spiritual life must be okay. We think God's face is shining upon us.

But it may well be the calm before the storm of judgment as Micah found in chapter 18 when he lost his priest and his idols. Or as the tribe of Dan found some hundreds of years later when they were taken into captivity.

See, it's easy to worship God in ways that suit us, to squeeze God into a little box on a mantelpiece, to squeeze him into our busy diaries in a place that's relatively convenient and not too demanding.

[26 : 57] It's easy to give God his little slot alongside all the other idols of our life that we serve. But God doesn't give us the freedom forever to do that. It's certainly not the freedom that Frank Sinatra boasted in.

To ancient Israel, God had made it very clear. They were to worship in the way that God chose. They were to worship in the place that God chose. They were to worship with uncompromised allegiance to Yahweh.

They were to worship with their heart, soul and strength. And to us the same principles apply. To worship in the way God chooses, in the places that God chooses, but in particular that place is focused in Jesus Christ, the living temple.

To worship with our heart and soul and strength, with uncompromised allegiance. See, God in the end is not a play thing for us, a toy to play with, to domesticate, to pull out of our pocket in times of trouble or when we think we need a special religious prayer or blessing.

He is the sovereign Lord of the universe and he set out clearly for us in his scriptures the right recipe. It is not for us to decide what we put in the cake of our religious mix.

[28 : 14] Those who walk in God's ways will find ultimate blessing. Those who do what is right in the Lord's eyes will see him face to face.

Amen.