

Views from the Pews – Joshua 1:1-9

Recently I was asked to read this passage aloud, in public. For our purposes at the time, the theme was courage, and its importance as a component of good leadership;

‘Be strong and of good courage’.

Afterwards, I was approached by a hearer who commented that the passage might just as well have been written recently, by an Israeli propaganda agency.

He had a point; even the most moderate Zionist would have latched onto the late chapters of Deuteronomy (the preceding Book in the Old Testament) as well as the early parts of Joshua, as evidence of Israel’s entitlement to the land west of the River Jordan. And the passage would be meat and drink to the current Israeli government especially amid growing opposition to the war in Gaza.

The Bible more often than not carries many layers of meaning, can be quoted out of context, and in extreme cases can be weaponized against those with whom we disagree.

Thus the Joshua story can be one of leadership following Moses’ death, or a story of God’s partnership with and sponsorship of the homecoming Israelites, or it can be a tale of entitlement, entitlement at the expense of others. It is important to think carefully about what is being said, and what is being implied.

For instance, verses 3 and 4 are geographically specific, but also refer generally to ‘every place that the sole of your foot will tread’. This will probably allow us to agree to the necessity for a Jewish homeland – that all seems very fair in the light of pervasive anti-Semitism – but we will probably concede (in the light say of the Good Samaritan story) that verses 3 and 4 need to be interpreted with great care. For instance, was God really inviting the Israelites to displace other nationalities? Or is it implied that those lands were empty? Is God just talking metaphorically, speaking of the rewards that follow obedience to the law (v7)?

In saying that there are just two great commandments ‘on which hang all the law and the prophets’, was Jesus calling for care in avoiding too literal – too legalistic- an interpretation of specific Old Testament passages?

The Moses/Joshua story is one of courage and endurance, of obedience and of faith; it may be best not to stretch it too much further than that.

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