

I was looking at this series, and then, of course, it all got knocked sideways by the whole pandemic that came along. But I just wanted to finish this off. Next week we'll be having Darren to finish the series: he'll be looking at "Samson and strength is weakness" - and once again it's another paradox that we'll be looking at next week. But our paradox this morning is "Up is Down", and we're looking at not a very well known character: his name was Abimelek. And we're going to read about Abimelek now from Judges 9:1-7, 19-24, and the New International Version says:

[Reading Judges 9:1-2...] Jerub-Baal is another name for Gideon, just in case you're wondering; so this is after Gideon's whole experience [...2-7, ...] don't worry about what comes between - I'm going to explain it to you: it's a bit complicated and it tells some weird stories; we're going to move onto verse 19 [...19-24]

Quite often the Bible stories that we look at in Scripture are well known to us, but this is one of those, actually, that probably wasn't well known to you.

We're going to look for a few moments at Abimelek. This idea that **Up is Down**. Up is Down - that paradox. The idea here is that the Kingdom of God is upside down. The way the world functions is that to get on, and to get up, you have to be climbing on other people. The idea is that to get on in the world, you have to climb the ladder; and to climb the ladder you have to be standing on other people. And really, that's the only way to get on, and if you don't get on, somebody else will get on standing on you. That seems to be the way things work in our society.

I don't know whether you can see that picture there: it's a dog-eat-dog world. I'm hoping that dog's not trying to consume the other one, but that's the idea that it's a dog-eat-dog world - that's the values that are most predominant in our world: if you want to get on, you've got to get up.

Thomas Merton, who was an American Catholic Theologian, said "People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall." If you make your aim to reach a particular place of success, just make sure that what success is, is real, and is valuable, and is worth the effort.

This man, Abimelek, sets out for us this idea that if you make the wrong things your aims and your objectives, it's going to end badly. So he had a deceitful start. We find - we didn't read it, but actually in chapter 9 of Judges - the Israelites defiled themselves: they chose to worship other gods, they got sick of following the teachings of Gideon (who in this passage is usually called Jerub-Baal) and of following the one true God, and they decided instead to go their own way.

In fact they repeat this same pattern time and again in the Old Testament. For a while, the people worship the Lord faithfully. Then, they start to creep into a little bit of worship of other gods, because worshipping a god you can see is so much easier than worshipping a God who is invisible. To worship a god who tells you the things you want to do are fine, is so much better than worshipping a God who says "No! Keep yourselves Holy. Be Holy as I am Holy." It's so much easier to worship a god who tells you the things you want to hear than the very things you don't. So they started to worship other gods. And then in anger, the Lord punishes them, usually, by allowing them to be overrun by their enemies.

Then, of course, they cry out to God "Lord, where have you gone? Why don't you hear us? We're in such trouble." And then the Lord responds and restores them, because the love of the Lord -

he is a gracious and compassionate God. And the pattern is repeated time and time again in the Old Testament. So, the Israelites defile themselves.

Abimelek seizes his opportunity for power – there's a power vacuum: Gideon has just died and so there is now no one to lead the people. And that's why they start wandering off and worshipping other gods. Abimelek is the son of Gideon by an unnamed Canaanite concubine. Now a concubine was a slave who didn't have the status therefore of a wife. And Abimelek was the son from that relationship.

Abimelek wanted desperately to become ruler and king of the city of Shechem – it probably would have been a large town in our view rather than a city which sounds very grand; but, actually, back in these days it would have been a town. But he wanted to be the ruler of this place. However, as an illegitimate son he had no chance of achieving this by fair means. So he uses his family connections: his mother, the concubine, was of Canaanite background and so he went to the leaders. This city was a Canaanite city of Shechem at the time, and so he went to the rest of the Canaanites there. He went to them. He used what he had – that was his mother's background – and he stirs up ethnic prejudice in order to get what he wants.

The same tools are used today by people to achieve what they want, so often when people are reaching for power. Reminds me of this film that I saw (quite a few years ago now): “The man who would be king”. Anybody seen it? One or two; yeah it's a great film:

It starred Sean Connery and Michael Caine, and the idea of the film – there were two ex-British military officers, two British military soldiers, who decided to make their fortune in India. They trained some men from a remote village to shoot rifles, and having made them the most military-powerful tribe in the area, they then go around conducting looting sessions from the other tribes around them. But during a raid, Connery's character gets hit with an arrow that somehow doesn't go into him – it actually sticks in his bandoleer – that's the thing that goes across your chest. And it sticks into that and it doesn't harm him. The villagers see this and they presume he is immortal: therefore he must be a god because the arrow didn't kill him. Now the two of them go along with this and he quite enjoys being a god – there's certain perks to being a god – and he thinks “this is really good, I'll stick with this.” And he gets infatuated with a beautiful woman in the village, and he decides “Well, I'm god, so I'm going to marry her because I can do what I like!” The problem is that the villagers didn't believe that a god could marry a mortal. And so it was becoming a problem, and, in particular, the beautiful woman villager didn't want to marry him – god or not she didn't like him. So as he goes to give her a kiss, she bites him, and he bleeds – gods aren't supposed to bleed in their belief. And so they realise he's not a god at all, and so he gets chased out onto a rope bridge and they cut the end of the rope bridge and he falls to his death.

People who desire to be kings or queens – it just ends in a terrible place.

So, we've had that deceitful start. It's followed by an unholy alliance: there's an unholy alliance between the leaders – the land owners of Shechem – and this man Abimelek. His Canaanite kinsmen, they lobby Shechem's leaders for him. So they go to the leaders of Shechem and say “This man will do for you; he'll make you a great city.” And they give him tribute – they pay him money – and he uses it to hire a bunch of thugs.

With his bunch of cut throats – his band of cut throats – he goes to his father's home town and kills all 70 of the legitimate heirs, who could have threatened his position. He does this, we're told in verse 5, on a single stone. Now that single stone would have been an altar. We don't know whether it was a pagan altar or whether it was an Israelite altar, but either way that was intended

to be a great offence: to kill these rightful heirs of the throne on this altar. A sign that he was prepared to go to any lengths to secure power for himself.

One brother – it says all, but actually one brother escaped. One brother escaped and he publicly challenges Abimelek as we heard in the reading. But, of course, there was an inevitable breakdown. An inevitable break down in the relationship between Abimelek and the leaders of Shechem because they decide they're not getting a big enough amount of the pie. So they start to ambush local traders and they're leaving, or they're arriving into, the city to steal the money from them, to be able to improve their own situation. And after 3 years it starts to unravel and the mistrust and hostility breeds between Abimelek and the leaders of the city.

There's a man called Gaal who provokes the situation and Shechem's leaders switch sides, and switch to Gaal away from Abimelek. Abimelek's chief official warns him of their treachery, and because he's been warned he's able to commit – there's a vicious response because they've turned against him. So he ambushes Gaal and the kinsmen of Gaal, and he routs them, he destroys them. It seems like that was quite lenient, but in actual fact he wasn't being lenient, he was biding his time.

He ambushes the people of the city and he destroys it – he destroys it with fire. He cynically waits for the people to start working in the fields outside the city and then he massacres all the people in the city. The people flee to a stronghold which Abimelek burns to the ground. (It so reminds me of what Putin is doing – what do they call it: a slash and burn. It feels as though the part of Ukraine that Putin will take will be a destroyed waste land – so similar to what we read of Abimelek here.) The people flee to a stronghold which he burns to the ground. The survivors took refuge there, and, interestingly, archaeological digs have found where Shechem was; they have done archaeological digs and they have found that there is a layer of soot at the right place in the archaeological record indicating that Shechem was burnt at about the time of these events.

And so Abimelek comes to what you could call a “fitting end”. He seems to have been in a blood thirsty frenzy. So he's done it once: he's destroyed this stronghold with fire, and he tries to do the same thing to another city. And he actually gets the torch himself and runs to the stronghold to set it alight. But the people inside didn't want this to happen and so actually a woman drops a millstone on Abimelek's head and cracks his skull.

Now grinding was women's work at this time in Middle Eastern culture. So Abimelek was actually fatally wounded by a *woman* using a domestic tool. He regarded that as a great source of shame, that he should be potentially fatally wounded by a woman using a domestic tool. And so, to avoid humiliation, he begs his servant to stab him so that no one can say “This man was killed by a woman using a domestic implement!”

And actually, we can learn some lessons from this, from Abimelek's life.

Grasping for power is a deep seated human character trait. A deep seated human character trait. In the end, this lust for power will always lead to disappointment, because we're human and whatever power we may have will one day disappear – we cannot achieve the level of power that will massage our ego enough. In fact, unfettered ambition can lead to unimaginable horrors. I don't know about you, but I think I've said it before, I have to filter the amount of news that I watch about what's going on in Ukraine because otherwise it can become depressing. And the reality is unfettered ambition can lead to unimaginable horrors.

We recognise we could put so many other people in the place of Abimelek in this story, but we are

called to follow the example of Christ who said, or rather Paul said it about him: Jesus always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God; instead of his own free will he gave up all that he had, taking the nature of a servant – he became like a human being and appeared in human likeness, he was humble, and walked the path of obedience all the way to death. That is our Lord. We are his followers; we choose to walk that way of suffering rather than the way of ambition.

So in terms of *Up being Down* Abimelek was trying to get up by standing on – literally standing on – the bodies of his own brothers – half brothers – whom he had killed. But actually he found that *Up* in reality was *Down* because he lost his humanity, and in the end he lost his life. *Up* in his case was most surely *Down*. If we follow Christ on the *Down* journey of humility, as those verses say to us, then we will discover the genuine *Up* of living a life of meaning and significance as we choose to follow our suffering Saviour.

Amen