

Rahab – Kate Day

Joshua 2

Joshua 6: 17 & 23-25

How's your visual imagination? Close your eyes and pretend you are watching the opening scenes of a major Hollywood blockbuster. It's an aerial view, looking down on a vast, dusty, Middle-Eastern plain, bisected by a wide river flowing busily southward. As the music swells majestically, the camera pans to the west, and we see a huge fortified city. We draw closer and circle over the massive walls. It is clearly a prosperous city. Many marketplaces are laid out. People in rich robes can be seen in the shady courtyards of their splendid homes. The camera pans in closer, to a street on the edge of the city. It becomes clear all is not well. Men are running to and fro, gathering equipment. Traders with strings of camels are loading up and preparing to move out from the inns where they have been lodging. We follow one caravan as it passes through the city gates on to the road leading down to the ford of the River Jordan. But the animals in front of us turn off the road, heading northwards. And as they move away the camera picks up the reason why – on the other side of the river an enormous army is mustering. They are preparing for war.

So, allow me to introduce you to Rahab, a resident of this city of Jericho. Not that we know very much about her. Her parents are still alive so we must presume she is quite young. She is unmarried. And, yes, she is described as a prostitute. In Jewish tradition she is an innkeeper, though maybe the distinction between the two professions is rather blurred. At any rate, we can assume she is used to being in the company of men, merchants, farmers, soldiers, who may, or more likely may not, respect her. A busy life, of hurly burly, constantly at everyone else's beck and call.

She is a woman on the margins. Of society. Of the city itself. Her house is on the outer side of the city wall and she lives within the wall itself. A woman who looks in both directions – inwards to the city of which she is nominally a part, which has assigned to her a place and a role and a sense of shame and inadequacy; and outwards to a horizon which promises that she can know self-respect.

From the roof of this house, she can see across the valley to the assembling Israelite army. Within the house she hears the bravado and bluster, the fears and the terror of the men of the city, and those who come from far away to trade with them. She hears the stories of these Israelite people. She hears the stories of their God. She has no time for the gods of the city. What have they ever done for her, and those like her? She has seen the shrine

prostitutes, used and abused by the rich and powerful in their pursuit of yet more self-promotion. Rahab has at least a shred more autonomy than they do.

But the Israelite God – this God sounds different. She finds herself lingering close to those who are speaking about him. She listens to the tale of Israel's God parting the Red Sea so that the Hebrews could cross on dry land and escape their Egyptian pursuers. She hears of the devastating might he bestows on his armies. And she learns of the nature of the relationship between this God and his people – a covenant relationship, a promise, "you shall be my people, and I will be your God." A belonging, a cherishing, a nurturing. She finds God's unfailing love for those he has chosen deeply attractive. This is a God she could worship. This is a people where she could belong.

So when the Israelite spies arrive at her door, she seizes her chance. She welcomes and entertains them, and when the King of Jericho sends a hit squad to deal with them, she hides them on the roof. And then claims they left earlier. I wonder if, like me, you can imagine her standing on the roof, watching the heavy mob lumbering along the road to the Jordan in a fruitless search for the men she now has at her feet, hidden under a pile of flax.

At her feet in more ways than one. For she knows much about what goes on in Jericho, and she can tell the spies what they need to hear. "Dread of you has fallen on us and (we) melt in fear," she tells them. "There (is) no courage left in any of us."

She makes it clear where her allegiance now lies. She speaks of the God of whom she has heard so much. States her faith in him. "I know the LORD has given you the land... The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below."

And she offers a deal. Her life, and the lives of her family, for the lives of the spies. A deal, or covenant, with them, which uses the same language of "unfailing love" that God has used in his covenant with Israel.

The deal is sealed. She will tie a scarlet cord in the window when the Israelites attack, and she and all who are with her will be saved. The spies are lowered from the window on a rope and make their escape.

The rest, as they say, is history. You may have heard it last week, when Paul told Joshua's story. The Israelites follow God's instructions and Jericho falls to them. And the spies are sent to rescue Rahab and her family. She is saved by the scarlet cord in her window. Just as the first-born of the Hebrews were saved by the red blood of the lambs on the lintels of their homes at the first "pass over" – the terrible 10th plague which forced Pharaoh to let

God's people go. Just as we are saved. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you," says Jesus.

I wonder who you see when you look at Rahab? Her story doesn't feature in the readings we use Sunday by Sunday, so it's entirely possible you have never really come across her, other than as an oblique reference to "Rahab the prostitute" in the Letter to the Hebrews. Not a very inviting introduction! But in that passage she is spoken of as one of the great heroes of Israelite history – because of her faith in God. She pops up again in the Letter of James, again as "Rahab the prostitute", where she features alongside Abraham as a hero who matches faith with action.

And yet, when I look at her story, I see so much more than that brief description shows. I see a woman of courage and determination, a woman who saw the truth of who God is and who stepped outside of culture and convention to respond to that reality. And who was saved, for a future she could never have imagined.

For Rahab features once more in the New Testament. Right at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus' family tree is set out. We know Jesus is the descendant of King David, but let's go back still further. David's father was Jesse, whose father was Obed, whose father was Boaz, whose father was Salmon and whose mother was..... Rahab.