

GIDEON
A MATTER OF STRENGTH

Do you consider yourself a strong person? What makes us strong? That we are physically fit and healthy, and can carry boxes when we move house? That we go to the gym, or for long walks. Or that we are strong emotionally, so that we sail through life untouched by life's difficulties and struggles, and they never cause us to miss a night's sleep, so that we have no worries or anxieties. Is that what we mean by strong? What does a strong faith look like? Someone who knows all of the answers to life's questions and has everything sorted? Most of us would give a qualified 'yes' to the question about being strong: we feel strong 'at times', or in some situations; but there would be other times when we feel anything but strong and confident. Some of us would consider the question a step too far; being strong is not a word or idea that we recognise in ourselves; we have no sense of strength, but all we can see is our weakness and sense of need.

Let's ask the same question about churches – what makes a strong church? We automatically think 'numbers' and so a strong church is equated with a big Church. Big Churches are seen as strong and so they attract more and more people and so become bigger and bigger, stronger and stronger. They have financial muscle; so that they are able to pay the bills and support initiatives and so become stronger and stronger. At least, that's the perception. But big doesn't always mean strong: big churches can be riven with divisions and be anything but strong at heart; big churches have to work hard at keeping a sense of unity, with like-minded people, and a focussed sense of purpose. So we need to have another way of understanding the strength of churches, their health and well-being. The world admires strength and power and being 'big'!

How do we live out Christian faith in a world where things happen to make us feel weak? There are so many things around at present to sap our strength and energy as Christians: the debates that affect the Church; the debates in our society about moral issues that not only reject our Christian heritage but make fun of Christian morals. Personal events sap our strength and energy. The struggle seems to get harder and harder. The story of Gideon is a matter of strength: everything about Gideon and around Gideon speaks of weakness, so what makes Gideon strong? How does he overcome his weaknesses and how does he win the day? It's a matter of strength!

"Here come the Midianites!" Every spring, the neighbouring armies descended on Israel in their hordes; they took away everything, crops, animals, and they ravaged the land and left it impoverished and the people in need. When we meet Gideon first he is threshing wheat in a winepress to try to hide it and keep it from being stolen. The people cried out to the Lord for salvation and Gideon is the answer to their prayers. "*The Lord...*" (6:12) It is hard not to laugh at that description of Gideon because he is anything but the 'mighty warrior'. His favourite word? – 'If! Everything about him says 'weakness' – "*How can...*" (6:15) He was given a test of his strength: to knock down his father's altar to Baal, the idol whom his father worshipped instead of the Lord: to his credit, he did it, but he did it at night so that so-one would see him. If God would help him, Gideon needs reassurance so he puts out a fleece and asks God to make it wet and the ground dry to show His power and when God does this, it is still not enough and Gideon needs more reassurance by God making the fleece dry and the ground wet!! Yet God chooses Gideon, not a strong and confident man, if anything weak and uncertain; God sticks with him!

Gideon next appears at the head of a mighty army. The call to arms had gone out and here are the men of Israel camped not far from the huge Midianite army come to carry out another raid. 32,000 Israelite soldiers are gathered; there is surely strength in numbers. So what does God say? *"You have ..."* (7:2f) Why should God deliberately weaken Gideon's army? Surely that is simply a recipe for disaster. All those who are afraid go home, 22,000 of them, and there are 10,000 left. So can these 10,000 men defeat a much larger army? God says *"There are..."* (7:4) Was there something about lapping water like a dog? Or was this just an arbitrary way of making a distinction? Both are possible. However we understand the process, the result was that Gideon is left with 300 men! From an army of 32,000, there are 300 left. How, on earth, can this army of 300 defeat the huge horde that is ready to raid Israel?

The story has two more twists. First of all, good leader that he is, Gideon wants to get to know his enemy, so he takes his servant to spy out the Midianite camp. They get there just in time to hear two soldiers talking about the dream which one of them had. He dreamt that a great barley loaf had rolled its way through the camp and had struck the tent and knocked it over. His friend replies: *"This can..."* (7:14) Even the Midianite soldiers are telling Gideon what God will do. The second twist is in Gideon's great strategy: he is a clever man so he divides his 300 men into 3 groups, and gives each of them a torch, a jar and a trumpet; they are to light the torch, but hide it inside the jar and at the given signal the men are to break the jars and blow their trumpets for all their might. In the middle of the night, Gideon surrounds the enemy; just after the change of the watch, he gives the signal, his men break their jars to flood the hills with light; they blow their trumpets to make as much noise as possible, so that soldiers who were fast asleep wake up, totally disorientated, see the lights, hear the noise and run for their lives. Gideon, the 'mighty warrior', wins the day.

What is this all about? *"You have..."* (7:2) God was Israel's Saviour. It was in God's power that Gideon won the battle and the whole of this story that we've been telling is to make Gideon and Israel aware that it was God's power that saves them. God's power would never let them down; indeed God has promised Gideon that He is there with him everywhere he goes. This elaborate slimming down of his army is to make it clear to Gideon and to Israel that it is only by the power of God that they are saved from their enemies. Perhaps for someone like Gideon, who is not the strongest of men by nature, winning a great battle like this might go to his head; he might become drunk with victory and the thought of his own power and might, so God prevents that from happening. Pride in his own achievements might have been Gideon's downfall; on the other hand, the people have seen the power of God at work to save them from their difficulties and so their faith in God is stronger.

Can we sort everything out for ourselves? Will we be masters of our own destiny? There are times when we like to think so. Difficult circumstances are problems to be solved and so we put our minds to resolving these problems for ourselves. We look for resources of strength and wisdom inside ourselves and so we try to overcome our difficulties in our own way and by our own strength. Churches look at problems to be faced and issues that need to be dealt with and devise a strategy for dealing with the issue. We add that strategy to the list of other strategies that we've devised. They work and we are pleased with ourselves! Now, there is nothing wrong with strategies, either in personal life or in Church; even Gideon had a strategy! But the spirit in which we devise these strategies is what counts! "The strategy we have devised will solve the problem!" Or "please God,

guide us and help us!" These are two quite different attitudes. One depends on ourselves, the other depends on God.

Gideon learned to depend on God. We're not too keen on being dependent; dependence smacks of weakness. On the other hand, we find it hard to understand that Jesus would help us anyway, because our faith is too small! Yet the truth is somewhere in between. We need to learn to depend on God who knows us and what we need and who is able to do far more for us than we ask or imagine. It is God who gives us strength to overcome; it is in God's strength that we are able to overcome difficult things! So we learn to trust Him. Prayer has a huge part to play in learning to depend on God; it is by prayer that we express our sense of dependence on God, so that we learn to express our concerns to Him when we pray and learn to listen for God's guidance and look for His strength to help us. Pride suggests that we should be self-sufficient; prayer helps us realise that it is better to be Jesus-sufficient!

The super-self-confident person, who to all the world looks as if they have everything sorted and under control – you need to have eyes to see that you are not master of your own universe and that in fact, life will be a lot better when you learn to depend on God; you will come to an end of your power and strength at some stage in life, so where then will you turn? The person who has no self-confidence whatsoever, who sees no reason why anyone would take notice of them under any circumstances and certainly don't see why God should bother Himself with their needs – you need to have eyes to see that God does care about you and that He is able to help you in all the times of your life, that you matter to God and that His power will make you strong enough to deal with anything and everything that comes your way. The person who feels strong at times, but weak at others, who can cope with some things, but there are times when that strength is stretched to the limit and beyond – we need to have eyes to see that God's strength is constant, unending and that it is in His strength we can deal with every circumstance in life. We need to learn to depend.

How do we live out Christian faith in a world that is hard? In our own strength, we don't! There was a set of material prepared by the Church of Scotland some years ago for Stewardship visits; it was in 4 or 5 sections, training people how to visit congregations and to talk about giving. Each section had a piece entitled "the strength in which we go!" and these pieces made us very aware that we go in the strength and power of God. Who are the strong people? The Bible would have us see that the strong are those who live by faith, depending on the power and strength of God; themselves aware of their weakness and seeing the need to depend. There seems to be something of a paradox there, but the truth is that when we are weak, then we are strong; when we are weak, then we depend on Jesus and His power at work in us makes us strong. The strong Church has a deep sense of dependence on Jesus, aware of its faults and frailties, aware that mission is something God does and it is not solely about our own strategies, a church that looks to Jesus to work His work. "*When I...*" (2 Cor 12:10) That's the wrong way round, surely! But that's what Gideon discovered; "too many men? Surely not, Lord!" It is God's power that saves, sustains, heals, helps, strengthens, enables us. Learn to depend on Him and be Jesus-sufficient!