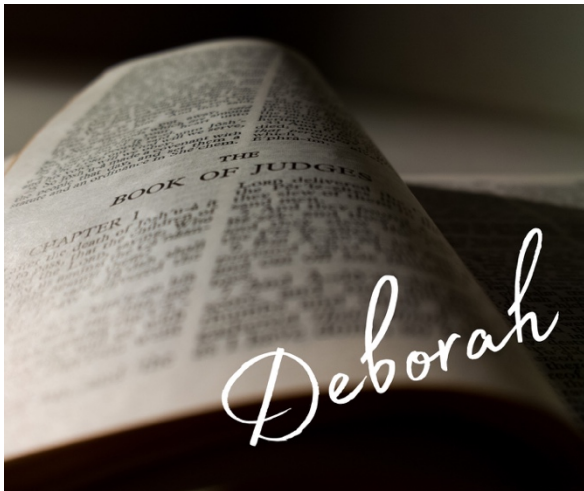


# Thought for the Day 1-7 February 2021

## by Rev. Bill Church

This week, each Thought will centre on a named but less well-known character from the Bible.

### Monday - DEBORAH



The Book of Judges can look like a random collection of gory and unedifying tales.

But there is a pattern: the people of Israel stray from worship of the One True God; they are beset by foreign enemies; they call on God in their distress; and he raises up someone to deliver them from those enemies. The “someone” was a “Judge”, although really more like a military leader.

Although ancient Israel was definitely not an Equal Opportunity employer, the second Judge was a married woman, Deborah. She planned the campaign against Jabin king of Canaan, and when Jabin was defeated and Sisera his general had been assassinated by Jael, another married woman, Deborah, sang a song of triumph – Judges 4.2-21, possibly the oldest text in the whole Bible.

Other songs of triumph are also sung by women, like Miriam, who, after the Egyptian chariots perished trying to follow the Israelites across the Sea, sang the refrain, “Sing to the Lord, for he has risen up in triumph; horse and rider he has hurled into the sea” (Exodus 15.21) and like the women who sang, “Saul struck down thousands, but David tens of thousands” (1 Samuel 18.7), much to King Saul’s discomfiture.

*Lord, when troubles beset us,  
hear our prayers and raise up help for us.  
And remind us to pray also when things are going well.*

## Tuesday – CORNELIUS



You may have been told that the land in which Jesus lived was in the grip of an army of occupation, which conjures up images of France from 1941 to 1945.

But the New Testament, on the whole, gives Roman soldiers a good press.

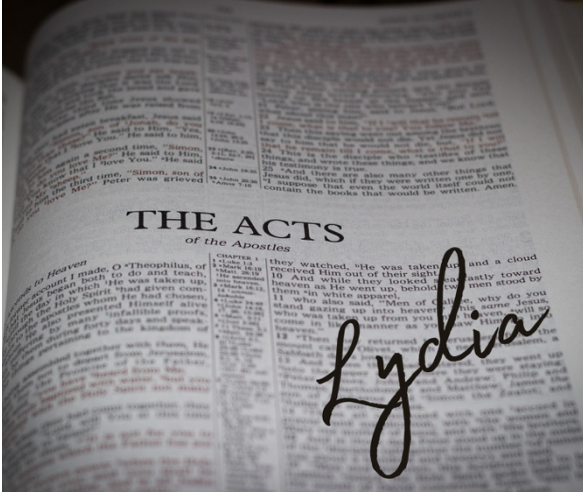
For instance, in Acts 10, Cornelius was a centurion based at the important garrison of Caesarea. He had become a “God fearer”, that is a gentile who shared in Jewish worship, and a generous donor (like the centurion at Capernaum in Luke 7 whom Jesus also commended for his faith).

He had a vision telling him in precise detail how to contact Peter and summon him from Joppa, more than a day’s travel away.

Meanwhile, Peter had a vision ordering him to eat a range of unclean beasts. Only when Peter was summoned to enter Cornelius’ house did he work out that this meant he should, despite all his previous ideas about religion, accept Gentiles as part of the emerging Christian church. Thus he baptised Cornelius and his friends and relatives; and thus Cornelius was the happy occasion of the leap of the church from being solely Jewish to becoming a worldwide fellowship.

*Lord, we pray that those in positions of power and authority over others  
May have at heart the best interests of those others  
And have the vision to explore new ways of service.*

## Wednesday - LYDIA



Paul and Silas (and probably Luke, as this is a “we” section of Acts – chapter 16) were in the great city of Philippi. Never one to miss a chance to preach the word, Paul and companions went to a riverside place of prayer. There they met Lydia, a “dealer in purple fabric”, one of the greatest luxuries of that age.

She seems to have been a woman of substance, possibly a widow, having control of her own business and her own household.

She was convinced by Paul’s words and was baptised, with her household, and Paul and companions stayed at her house until they left Philippi.

This episode has featured in two debates about church order.

Proponents of infant baptism point out that even in the earliest times baptism was not confined to individual confessing adults but, as here, to whole households (like also the household of the jailer whose story is interwoven in the same chapter).

Proponents of women’s ordination point out that it was originally the custom for the head of the household to preside at the shared Eucharistic meal. Lydia was head of her substantial household. Did she preside at the Eucharist for her household and friends?

*Lord, we pray that you will open our eyes  
to the potential of seemingly chance encounters  
and open our hearts and minds  
to new possibilities of faith and experience.*

## Thursday - THE TWO MAGI



No, not a misprint. We revere the Three Magi/Wise Men/Kings who came to Jesus' cradle, and later have featured in countless cards and nativity plays, for their perceptiveness and perseverance and generosity.

Not all Magi (sorcerers? conjurors? soothsayers?) were so benevolent. Some liked to see themselves as the celebrities

and influencers of their day.

Simon Magus (Acts 8) had built up for himself a great reputation and, I imagine, business in Samaria. When Philip the Deacon came with the word of Christ, and miraculous healings, Simon was persuaded and was baptised. But old habits die hard and when Peter and John came bestowing the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, Simon offered money for a franchise. He was roundly rebuked by Peter, but did at least have the grace to beg absolution from the consequences of his mercenary proposal.

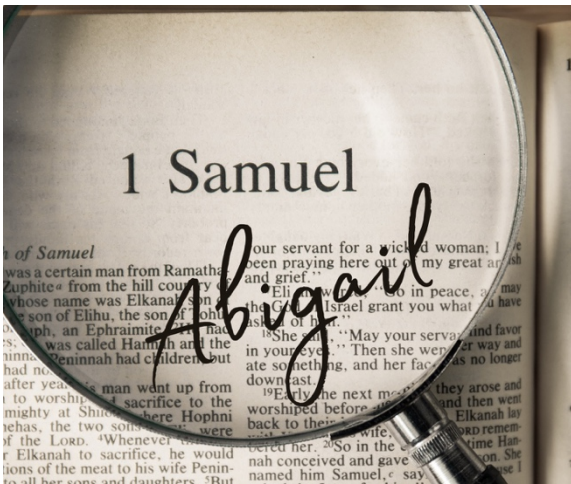
In Acts 13, at the court of Sergius Paulus, Roman proconsul of Cyprus, the magician Elymas Bar-Jesus was a sort of court jester (though I am sure he took himself far too seriously to accept that title). He was upset when Paul arrived spreading the word of God and tried to poison the mind of the proconsul against it, whereupon Paul cursed him with temporary blindness. Not surprisingly, Sergius Paulus was impressed and became a believer.

Both those Magi had been using their arts and charisma for their own benefit and self-aggrandisement but their pride came before a fall.

*Lord, may all who have talents and charisma  
use them for the common good.  
May they, and we, avoid using God-given gifts  
just for self-aggrandisement and personal gain.*

## **Friday - ABIGAIL**

(1 Samuel 25)



Abigail, a clever and beautiful woman, was married to Nabal, a cantankerous oaf but very rich.

Nabal grazed his many sheep in the uplands of Judaea, where David and his band of outlaws were on the run from King Saul.

David safeguarded Nabal's sheep and shepherds, whether out of kindness or as a sort of protection racket, and at the sheep

shearing festival he sent to Nabal asking for supplies. Nabal's response was unhelpful and abusive and David at once set off to wreak bloody revenge.

But Abigail heard of it, saddled up her donkeys with plentiful provisions and met David on the way and fell on her face before him. She apologised for Nabal, predicted that David would become king and urged him to avoid the blood guilt that would come from his intended slaughter. David was impressed by her argument, and no doubt also by her beauty, took the offered provisions and turned back.

Next morning, Abigail told Nabal, who promptly had a fit and ten days later died. When David heard this he swiftly sent his men to Abigail with a proposal of marriage, which she equally swiftly accepted.

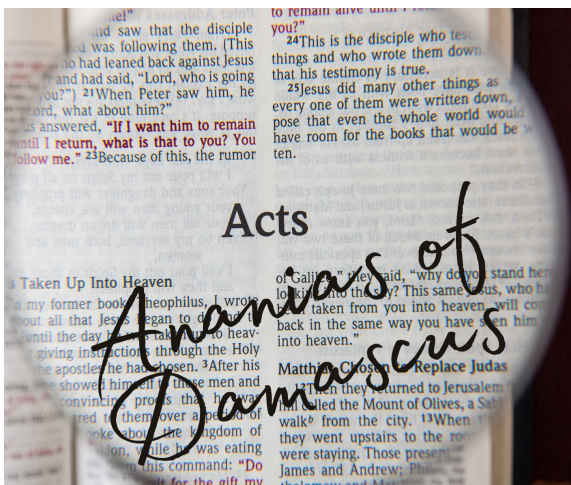
What are we to make of this? Was Abigail really protecting her husband, Nabal, or was she so fed up with him that she was undermining him? Did she spot that David's star was rising and wanted to be on the winning side? Did she fancy him so much she was happy to hasten Nabal's demise? Did she know full well that David would be attracted by her combination of good looks and shrewdness?

Whatever the answers, this story, realistic rather than pious, was all part of the providential circumstances by which David came to be king and to found a dynastic line which led to the manger in a stable in David's city, Bethlehem.

*Lord, we pray that in a world  
of mixed motives and brutal realities  
Your providence may nevertheless  
lead us nearer to the Promised Land.*

## Saturday – ANANIAS OF DAMASCUS

(Acts 9)



In 1601 and 1604 the Italian artist Caravaggio painted two versions of the Conversion of St Paul. In both, a huge horse stands over the fallen Paul and both are heroic in scale.

But I think the real hero of the story is Ananias. Look at where he was: a leader of the new church in Damascus which was in serious danger – see what happened to Stephen. He had a vision telling him to go to

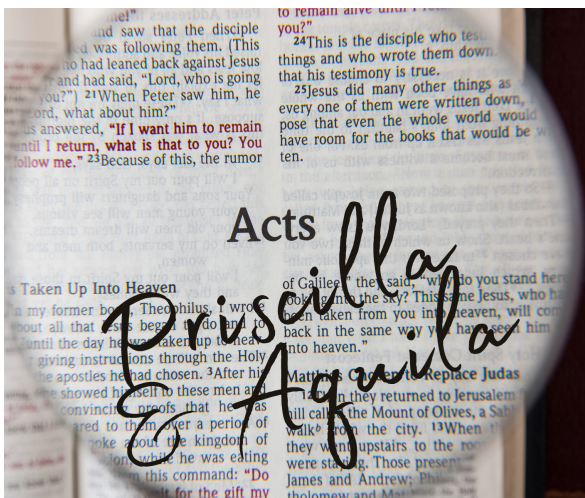
a house in Straight Street and heal the arch-persecutor of the church. Not surprisingly, Ananias remonstrated, but God insisted and Ananias obeyed. He greeted him as "brother Saul" and laid on his hands. Saul regained his sight and strength and was baptised. The rest is history. But would that history have happened without Ananias' courageous obedience?

“Love your enemy” is a great command but notoriously hard to follow and often risky. In this case, the reward was world-changing. Let us remember Ananias with gratitude. There is a chapel in Damascus in what is thought to have been his house.

*Lord help us to love our enemies  
and to offer help to those who scorn us.*

## Sunday - PRISCILLA AND AQUILA

(Acts 18)



After three Thoughts about women and three about men, now one about a married couple.

Priscilla and Aquila were Christian Jews who had been expelled from Rome in the reign of the Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54). They resettled in Corinth and carried on their trade of tentmakers. That, of course, was also Paul's trade and when he came to Corinth he stayed with them and worked

together with them for about 18 months. When Paul left for Syria and then Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila travelled with him.

At Ephesus, they are credited with having taught Apollos (a possible author of the Epistle to the Hebrews) and putting him right on some points of the faith.

They are also named at the end of Romans, as Prisca and Aquila, whom Paul thanked for risking their necks to save his life (possibly when Paul was nearly lynched in Ephesus) and who hosted a house church. They are similarly named at the end of 1 Corinthians and 2 Timothy.

They are always mentioned together.

This reminds us of the importance of the network of Christian evangelists and leaders, men and women, who built up the churches that Paul started.

*Lord, we thank you for the fellowship of marriage  
and the comradeship of work.*

I make no apology for having led you through some biblical byways rather than along the more-travelled motorways. The authors of the books of the Bible had a reason for what they included, even if we can sometimes only guess at it.

Study of the Bible is basic to Christian life – so it is important, but it can also be fun. As you may suspect, I have enjoyed writing these Thoughts.