

Heavenly Father, thank you that have given us this incredible passage to learn from and I pray you would open our minds to understand what's going on in the history here but more importantly to see what you are doing and how it's relevant to us and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen

Well as I mentioned we have a daughter arriving in April, we've been kind of listing potential names, I've been looking for an Old Testament name, and I did suggest Jezebel might be a good name. Didn't get far in the sort of discussion that we had as a family.

But Jezebel, unfortunately, is an underappreciated character in the Old Testament. I actually have a bit of a kind of soft spot for Jezebel. I think she's a great villain. To be clear, she's a villain. But she's not the Jezebel of pop culture. The Jezebel in pop culture. Who here has the Jezebel spirit? I mean the book, not the actual thing.

There was a famous book, *The Jezebel Spirit*, which is kind of casting this kind of seductress or this fallen woman. Nothing to do with the actual Jezebel of the history of the Bible. The Jezebel of the Bible is far more interesting and dangerous than the Jezebel of popular culture.

The Jezebel in the Bible is a ruthlessly efficient political and religious activist, right, who is amazingly shrewd, powerful, efficient, ruthless. She's playing for the wrong side, right? So she's an enemy of God's prophets, but you have to at least respect just that she gets her job done. So one of my favourite villains of the Bible.

Let's get into the passage and meet Jezebel, this formidable adversary of God's people. And it all begins.

I picked a passage which kind of illustrates something of her character, and it's from Chapter 21 of Kings, as we had read, thank you so much, William.

Naboth's Vineyard, Naboth the Nobody Next Door. Chapter 21. Sometime later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth, the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab, king of Samaria.

So we meet this very unimportant character, Naboth the nobody. The only thing that's interesting about him is he happens to have a next-door neighbour called Jezebel and her husband, the king Ahab. And that's where his problems come from. Because he happens, he has the misfortune of living in the family home, the family vineyard next door to Ahab and Jezebel in the palace, when Ahab decides he really wants to plant a veggie patch.

So Ahab wants a veggie patch. He looks at it and says, do you know what a great place to plant my pumpkins or whatever it was? Right there where Naboth lives. And so he goes down and he says, "Hey, look, can I buy your field?" He makes an offer that he can't refuse. "I'll give you only one."

But Naboth is not selling. And why? Well, actually, under the Old Testament law, you weren't allowed to sell your inheritance, your family land. You're a custodian for a

generation. It's not yours to sell. So Naboth, as a good Jewish man, said, "Well, no, I can't sell my ancestral lands. What are you talking about? It's not for sale."

Now Ahab, the great king of Israel, responds to this by sulking. He goes home and he sulks in bed, all mopey, refusing his dinner, doesn't want to talk to anyone, sullen and angry because Naboth had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my ancestors", verse four.

Now his wife, Jezebel, just gets sick of it. "Oh, come on, you pathetic man. You're meant to be the king of Israel. Do something. Stop sulking," she says. "Get up. Eat. Cheer up. Oh, for goodness' sake, I'll get you the field."

And so Jezebel goes, and in one email, she gets the field. What does she do? She sets up Naboth the nobody next door. She gets her pen, writes, forges a letter, logs into his email account, sends a letter on behalf of her husband, basically setting up Naboth on capital charges of blasphemy. Organises for a fast and organises for Naboth to be sitting there, gets some rascals, pays off some unscrupulous characters to come and accuse him with two witnesses, accuse him of a capital offence, of blasphemy against God and the king.

And sure enough, it's successful. Naboth is arrested. He is delivered the sentence of death, and suddenly the field is available. This is one way of doing real estate transactions. Jezebel, she is ruthless, and she's very good at it. And so suddenly the field is available.

The lesson here is don't mess with Jezebel. And who's going to stop her? She's the queen. You can see she really wears the pants when it comes to her and the king as well. She's really the one in charge of the kingdom. Ahab's just sulking in bed. She's the one getting things done. Who's going to stop her? Who's even going to notice?

What's remarkable for me about this chapter is even that it's recorded in the Book of Kings. The Book of Kings sometimes goes over a reign of a whole kingdom, like a king's whole reign for 20 years with one sentence. He ruled for this many years, then he died. And yet Naboth, the nobody with his vineyard next door, gets a whole chapter, in fact, more than a chapter. We come back and revisit it later.

Why? Why is this here in the middle of the reign of Jezebel and Ahab? Well, it's because Jezebel and Ahab thought that no one would stop them, that no one would care, no one would even notice what they did, because that's what the rich and powerful often do, isn't it? The rich and powerful act high-handedly, knowing that no one will ever call them to account.

Who's going to? Who's even going to care about Naboth the nobody? Well, God cares. God notices. In fact, God sends Elijah, the prophet, with a special delivery message from God.

Then the word of the Lord, verse 17, came to Elijah the Tishbite. Go down to meet Ahab, king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He's now in Naboth's vineyard where he has gone to take possession of it. Say to him this. This is what the Lord says. Have you not murdered a man and seized his property? Then say to him, this is what the Lord says. "In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood. O yes, yours."

We know that God's word is powerful. If God says it, it comes true. And Elijah is a true prophet, a true prophet of God who faithfully passes on the message. And so while the chapter seems to be closed on Naboth, the story moves on.

Hold that thought because Jezebel and Ahab will hear more about Naboth than what they did to him. In fact, as we read on in the next chapter, chapter 22, the prophecy comes full circle. The word of the Lord comes true.

Chapter 22, Ahab, the king, has ridden out into battle, and he's in disguise so no one knows he's the king because he doesn't want to get targeted. And someone completely randomly, by total fluke, fires off a stray arrow, which you wouldn't believe it, pierces right through his armour in a gap and kills him there.

Now, I say it's a fluke, but of course it's not a fluke, is it? Because we know that the word of the Lord has come through Elijah to Ahab.

Now, you'll never guess where they bring him back to die, where his blood ends up being licked up by dogs as they're washing out his chariot. You'll never guess where he goes back to. Naboth's field.

And you'll never guess, a little bit later on in the story of Kings, you'll never guess where Jezebel ends up falling to her death and dying splattered over the ground where dogs lick up, you'll never guess where that happens. Naboth's field.

Because God saw what they did to Naboth and this nobody next door called Naboth actually brings down the dynasty of Ahab, one of the greatest dynasties that the northern kingdom of Israel has seen.

Now, I acknowledge this is not particularly G-rated by Old Testament standards even. This is a pretty gory story. And it's confronting to see God kind of using violence, isn't it, to bring about his prophecies and plans.

But the thing that we've got to realize about God, he's anti-violence. God is anti-violence. He mourns that this world is full of violence. It's not the way it should be, not the way he made it, and not the way it will be.

But he's also pro-justice. God is the God of justice and so the wicked, the powerful think that they're getting away with murdering an innocent man to take his stuff. But they're wrong because the God of justice sees and the God of justice consistently brings justice's day eventually.

We saw that back in the beginning of the Old Testament in the book of Genesis. Chapter 4, the very first murder on planet Earth, Cain kills his brother Abel. And God says, "Well, where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," replies Cain. "Am I my brother's keeper?" The Lord says, "What have you done? Listen, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground."

And that idea, that actually the earth that we stand on, remembers the blood spilt on it becomes a bit of a theme as we read through the Bible. We see it in the story of Naboth and his vineyard, that the family of Ahab and Jezebel just can't escape the blood guilt that's absorbed by the ground.

We even see it in James 5, where the rich are given a bit of a serve by James, the brother of Jesus. Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Look, the wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. Anyone here not paid their lawn mowing bill? This is a reminder.

But it's more serious than that, isn't it? It's oppression of the poor, economic oppression of the weak. And God hears it. God is not indifferent to what goes on on this planet.

And so we see that in the story of Ahab, part of the judgment on Jezebel is that she introduces false worship to Israel. She's the one that sets up the worship of Baal, who's a foreign god, a false god, a fake god. She brings false worship. And so part of her judgment is to do with the vertical dimension, if you like, of sin. She's rebelling against God, disbelieving, disrespecting, disobeying his authority as God. That's the vertical dimension of sin, which we often think of.

But there's a horizontal dimension as well, which the story of Naboth illustrates. That is, God really cares how we treat each other, and he particularly cares how the powerful, who think they're getting away with it treat the less powerful, treat those who get in their way. God cares about the horizontal as well as the vertical.

And this is very confronting to me because actually I last preached on this passage on blood-soaked ground. Let me tell you that story.

One of Melbourne's great lost opportunities, I'm from Melbourne, I live in Melbourne, one of our great missed opportunities in history was that we were very almost called the City of Batmania. Did you know that? Originally it was Batmania.

Now the story of that actually has a link with Tasmania and that is, there was a chap called Mr Batman. John Batman who, 50 years before the first trams rattled through town, came to what's now known as Melbourne seeking a new life. And he was actually not a convict, he was a born in Australia, His dad was transported here and his mum decided to pay passage so that she could come with her husband and keep the family together.

So he was born here in Australia and he tried to get land to start his life, start settling down. He was rejected in New South Wales, he was rejected in Tasmania, and so he came where the rejects go, which is obviously Melbourne. I thought that would go down well here. Entered Melbourne, trying to start a new life and he saw Melbourne looked great and naturally names the new place that he's come to after himself and calls it Batmania. Again, missed opportunity of history.

Now, most European settlers didn't bother to make treaties with the local inhabitants, the people who were already there. And that's because our nation was founded on this sort of legal fiction that the place was unoccupied, *terra nullius*, nobody's land.

Of course, we know that that's not true. The land was very much occupied and had been for about 65,000 years or so. But the English law said, no people here, no one occupying the land, no need for a treaty. But John Batman actually did try to make a treaty, sort of.

On the 6th of June, 1835, on the banks of Merry Creek, which is very near to where I last preached on this passage, Merry Creek. It's now called Northcote, a great live music scene. But Batman signs a treaty with the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation.

Signs a treaty, and I'll let you decide if you think the deal was fair. He gives them 40 blankets, 30 axes, 100 knives, 50 scissors, handkerchiefs, flour, and shirts, and they, in exchange for that, will give him Melbourne. Fair trade? Maybe. I'll let you decide afterwards.

Now, so many questions we can ask about this. For starters, the signatures on the document are highly suspect. Historians tell us it's very unlikely that they were actually signed by the

Wurundjeri people. Even if they were, it's almost impossible they were agreeing to what John Batman thought they were agreeing to.

In other words, they weren't selling their land, probably. They were offering him safe passage, probably. And the reason is because, like Naboth, they didn't see the land as theirs to sell. The custodians of their ancestral lands, it's not mine to sell, as Naboth had explained.

But in the end, it didn't matter in the end because the governor, the king's representative, said that the treaty was invalid. Why? Well because the land already belonged to the English king. It wasn't theirs to trade.

And over the next few years European settlers started violently clearing the Aboriginal people off the land. Many were killed, almost everyone was displaced. There was some kind of resistance, some brave resistance, but the leaders of that resistance were captured and the remaining Wurundjeri people were transported, first to Healesville and then later on to Gippsland.

And that's the shameful truth, that where I'm from, compared to the rest of Australia, there's actually far fewer remaining Aboriginal communities left because they got killed.

Now, I wasn't alive when any of this happened, obviously. I wasn't alive. I didn't do it personally. But I am part of the nation that did. And I happily share in the good things that come from being in Australia. I happily share in the great prosperity, the great inheritance that we have from being part of this nation, the sporting victories of our football teams and our Matildas. I happily share in that glory. I must collectively somehow take a share of that guilt as well.

And the good thing is that the Christian faith gives me tools to process that, which I wanted to share briefly now with you. Because when we look at the past and look at the world, it can be overwhelming, can't it, the injustices that we see. It's easier just to ignore it or pretend it didn't happen. I think that's a very tempting and understandable but misguided way of responding to the injustice we see.

The Christian way to respond, well, I think there are three. See what you think.

One resource I think we have, the first one, is to lament. The Bible's full of lament, both individual lament, but also corporate lament, where we grieve what has been lost. I can't bring back the generations that were never born because of what happened where I live. I can't bring back the languages that have been lost, the culture that has been erased. And for that, I lament.

The second thing, closely related, is that I can confess. We can confess. Old Testament, New Testament, both full of examples of groups of people confessing sins, even sins long before they were born. And as Anglicans, it's a good thing. We have confession built into our Anglican services. Isn't that great? Because we recognize that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the whole world, our individual sins and our collective sins. And so when we come to meet with each other and meet with God, we do so having confessed our sins.

Can I say, I mean, some people think that's quite a dreary way to start a church service but I think it's brilliant. I think it's brilliant that every time, nearly every time, we get together, we confess our sins because it's a reminder that we are all, we are all guilty in different ways, and it's not about perfect people gathering with God here. You don't have to be perfect to

come to Jesus. You just have to admit you need his help. And that's hard to do sometimes. It's hard to admit you need his help.

I had a friend who was a surf lifesaver. She's also a woman. And it was really interesting that whenever she would ride out to a young man who was drowning, he would refuse her help often. One of them actually said, "I refuse to be rescued by a female lifesaver."

So she had a good trick. She would just circle around enough that when he was really about to go under, she could come back and suddenly his mind had changed. It's really interesting. It reflects a lot about, I think, young men, humans in general. We don't want to admit we need help. And yet the Christian faith reminds us that we all need help. We need a saviour.

I've done things I'm not proud of. What about you? We've done things we can't be proud of. And so we come to Jesus confessing, knowing that he doesn't just want to beat us up about it. He wants to forgive us. That was the whole point of him dying on the cross. To make peace with God and with each other as we confess our sin.

And the third thing is hope. The world is just so depressing on the news. Isn't it? You don't even need to switch on the news. Our communities are full of so many things that are depressing. Things that are beyond our repair. Things where our best efforts achieve nothing or worse, make things more complicated.

Yet as Christians, we don't lose heart. Why? Because Jesus can make all things new. In fact, he has begun. He is reconciling us to God, but he's also reconciling us to each other. And we see the first fruits of that in our own communities. Not perfectly, but we see glimpses of it in our communities where the Holy Spirit is uniting us together, mending bridges that have been burnt, bringing different cultures and nations together under our crucified Messiah.

So I think of, in my context at Ridley, I think of the Indigenous Christian Fellowship that we partner with. We're training a young Aboriginal man for ministry and support him through his studies in lots of different ways so that he can return to his community. I give thanks for him.

But I also think about our growing relationship with an indigenous Bible college up north who's helping us with the gaps in our expertise and our syllabus. It's a great privilege to see God bringing different people together under Christ. I find it incredibly moving and humbling when Jesus does that by his spirit.

And so we do not lose heart, though we lament and we confess, because we know that one day soon Jesus Christ will return to judge the living and the dead, and bring to light what is in darkness, and unite in himself the kingdom of men and women from every nation in worship of the crucified Messiah.

And so the question we need to ask is, are you with him? Are you in Christ? Do you want to be part of that future? And I pray that the answer to that would be yes.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you so much that you have not only created us in your image, but yet more wonderfully restored us in the blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Thank you that you have destroyed what divides us. You have broken down walls of hostility between nations and united people from all the different families on earth in one body, Jesus. We pray that we would lament, that we would confess and that we would not give up, we would have hope in what you are doing. We ask this in Jesus' name. Come Lord Jesus.