

Obscure Characters

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, March 2006.

Part 1: Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 9)

Jesus. Adam and Eve. Paul. Jonah. Daniel. Mary. David and Goliath. There are some characters in the Bible we've all heard of. Even people who've never been to a church in their lives have heard of them.

But there are other characters who're less well known. Maybe they've stayed obscure because they only appear in one or two verses. Maybe their stories are less dramatic or memorable. But they're still fascinating people, whose lives have a resonance today. So for the next three weeks we're taking a close look at three obscure characters of the Bible. People you probably won't know much about, people you've probably never heard of!

So who are we looking at today? Well, first I want to tell you about something I did a few years ago. I decided that during that year I was going to read the whole Bible. Something I'd never done before. I'd probably read nearly all the bits of the Bible at some point, but I'd never gone systematically through the whole thing. And after nearly a year of reading the whole Bible, I looked back over everything I'd read and thought about what had really struck me. Which people had stuck in my mind and had gripped my imagination. And the name that topped my list was somebody called Mephibosheth.

Don't worry if you haven't heard of Mephibosheth. I hadn't really heard of him either. And maybe that's one reason I found him so fascinating. Suddenly coming across a totally new person there in the Bible and finding out more about his life. There are other reasons why he stuck in my mind. But we'll come to those in a moment.

So where do we meet Mephibosheth? He's in the OT Books of 1 and 2 Samuel. And that puts us back to around 1,000 BC. In other words, about 3,000 years ago from today. Back in the time of King David. And you've got to understand what's going on to see who Mephibosheth is, and how he fits in.

First, you've got the Prophet Samuel, who's an old man, and a respected figure in Israel. The leaders of the nation come to Samuel and tell him they want a strong king, like all the other nations have. Up till now, they've managed without one. Samuel can foresee all kinds of problems with this idea, so he tells them it's not a good idea. But the people keep on at him. So Samuel anoints the nation's first king. He's 30 years old and his name is Saul. And Saul has a son called Jonathan.

To start with, Saul does a good job as king, with his son Jonathan helping him in all sorts of ways. But after a while Saul becomes a tragic figure. It becomes clear that Saul has two big problems. First, he disobeys some of the commands that God gives him. Secondly, he suffers from some kind of mental illness. As Saul gets crazier and crazier, Samuel is sent off by God to find a replacement king. And the person he's guided to is a youth called David, the youngest of 8 sons of a man called Jesse. So Samuel goes ahead and anoints David as King-in-Waiting.

Meanwhile, one of Saul's servants has also heard of David. Not as a potential king, but because he's a musician. He's a harpist. And it turns out that the only thing that can calm King Saul down during his bouts of mental illness is the soothing music played by David. And David becomes best of friends with the King's son Jonathan. But eventually Saul realizes David is a rival for his crown and starts trying to kill him.

So you've got this incredible drama of power, kingship, rivalry, faith and madness playing itself out on the national stage. And it's against this extraordinary backdrop that the life of Mephibosheth is lived out. But compared to big political and religious figures like Saul, David and Jonathan, Mephibosheth's story is small and insignificant. What PG Wodehouse calls 'small potatoes'! And maybe that's partly why we can relate to him. So who is he?

Mephibosheth is the son of Jonathan. In other words, the grandson of King Saul. And he grows up in the royal household. But at the age of five something dramatic happens. The turbulent politics of the country reaches crisis point. There's a battle, where Saul and Jonathan are both killed. When the news of their deaths reaches the royal household, Mephibosheth's nurse escapes with him. She runs for her life with him, in case other members of Saul and Jonathan's family are killed too.

But as the nurse hurries away with him, Mephibosheth trips and falls. And the fall's so violent that his ankles break and he ends up permanently disabled in both legs. The young Mephibosheth is carried to a place called Lo Debar, a town on the other side of the Jordan river, in what we now call the country of Jordan. There, he's looked after by a rich man called Machir. Mephibosheth grows up having a quiet life in Lo Debar, and eventually gets married. And of course, he keeps his true identity a secret because his life could be at risk if people found out who he really was.

After many years, David's finally king and the battles are finally over. And there's a time of peace in the land. And at that point, David remembers a promise he made long long ago to his best friend Jonathan while he was still alive (*1 Sam 20:15*). This promise was that he'd be kind and generous to Jonathan's family for ever, whatever happened to Jonathan himself. David remembers his promise and asks around, to find out if anybody from Jonathan's family is still alive. And that's when a man called Ziba reminds him about this disabled young man called Mephibosheth, who's living over in Jordan.

So David summons Mephibosheth back to Jerusalem, to the royal palace. And Mephibosheth is scared witless. Why? Because it was normal practice in the ancient world for a king to kill off all the family members of previous kings, so he'd have no rivals. It was a violent and ruthless period of history. So Mephibosheth simply assumes that David's summoned him to be executed.

But all his expectations turn out to be wrong. David explains why he's called him. He wants to restore to him all the lands and properties of his grandfather and father and he wants him to live in Jerusalem and eat at the royal table. In other words, Mephibosheth, his wife and kids are to be family.

So why did I find the story of Mephibosheth so moving and so memorable? I think four main reasons. Let me just quickly run through them:

1) First, the story of Mephibosheth is a story of a 'nobody'. His life's lived against the backdrop of the most turbulent era of biblical history, where the scene's dominated by some great heroes of faith. Larger than life characters, caught up in warfare, madness and power politics. In fact, the only reason we remember him is because of who his family were. But Mephibosheth himself grows up with all his royal privileges stripped away, anonymous, in a strange country, with a foster family. And yet there he is in the Bible.

His story runs parallel to that of the great King David. But unlike David, he has no power, influence or armies at his command. He's a nobody! But the life story of Mephibosheth is a reminder that God cares deeply for the 'nobodies' of this world. You don't have to be a great king or religious leader to matter to God and be loved by God. You don't have to see great miracles or prove yourself in superhuman feats to be loved by God. Nobodies like Mephibosheth can be part of his family too.

2) Second, the story of Mephibosheth is a story of a victim. None of this is his fault. It's not his fault he had to leave the royal court. It's not his fault he broke both his ankles and the bones didn't knit together again properly, so he remained disabled for the rest of his life. It's not his fault he spent most of his adult life worried that a hit squad from the other side of the Jordan might find out who he was and where he was living. He's lost his family, the use of his legs, and his security. He's a victim of a violent period in human history.

It's a reminder that each of us can be caught up in a web that's not of our own making. Mephibosheth's a victim. Like refugees, and people affected by disasters or wars around the world today. Maybe like you and me. It may be disability, suffering, broken relationships, obstacles in our way, loss, or whatever. Sometimes we're innocent victims too.

But there's no dwelling on this theme of Mephibosheth as victim, no mulling over why it all happens. How God allows such things. There's none of that. It's as if the writer says: 'Well, these things happen. In war and power politics, innocent people get hurt. It happens'.

But remember, the story of Mephibosheth is set in the context of God's long-term relationship with his people. Mephibosheth may be a victim, but he's still loved by God. He still matters to God. Even while he's off in exile, anonymous, disabled and fearful, God's still looking after him, still loving and protecting him. And that's true for us as well.

3) Third, the story of Mephibosheth is a story of commitment. David remembered the promises he and Jonathan had made to each other. Despite the fact that it was Jonathan's father Saul who'd tried to kill him. So David had every reason to hate the family of his enemy. But he and Jonathan made a covenant of friendship to each other. And David remembers.

There's something for us here about the promises we make too. How committed we are to each other? To our partner, to friends, to family members, to people you're getting to know at Holy Trinity? Are you a person who keeps your promises and commitments? There's also an echo of the commitment God shows to each of us. God remembers his covenant commitments. He never forgets or lets us down. He keeps holding onto us even when we let go of him. He comes and searches for us, even in our exile and anonymity.

4) Fourth, and finally, the story of Mephibosheth is a story of grace. Grace is my favourite word in the Bible. Grace means showing love and favour to people who don't expect it or deserve it. In a way, it's the key theme of the Bible. That's Mephibosheth. When David tells him his plans to bring him to the court, what does he reply? His actual words are: 'What is your servant that you should notice a dead dog like me?'

Now, if one of today's self-esteem counsellors went to see Mephibosheth, he'd probably say to him: 'Hmm, low self esteem due to a disability. You need to start feeling good about yourself. Every morning look in the mirror and say, "I'm a beautiful person"!'.

But Mephibosheth isn't suffering from a low self-esteem that he ought to snap out of. He really is a victim. He's lived his whole life certain that he's about to be executed by the man he's now standing in front of, King David. Instead, this man he has every right to hate and fear tells him he's restoring to him all his family land and property. And from now on, he and his family are going to live at the royal palace and eat at the king's table.

It's a story of sheer grace. When the one you fear will bring judgement and death turns around and brings you hope, acceptance and salvation. And if that sounds a bit familiar, so it should. Because that's the story at the heart of the Christian faith. Sheer grace.

The Christian story is like one of those Roald Dahl stories, or a film like *The Sixth Sense*, where there's an unexpected twist.

Day by day, we muddle on through life. We fail to live up to God's ideals. We fail even to live up to our own ideals. At times, our self-esteem can hit rock bottom. We wonder if we're good parents. There are times when we begin to wonder if life has any point at all.

But then an unexpected invitation comes, which addresses you as if you're royalty, the long-lost child of the King. In a nutshell, the heart of the Christian faith is this. It doesn't matter if you're a victim of circumstances. It doesn't matter if you feel your life's insignificant in the bigger scheme of things. It doesn't matter who you've been or what you've done.

Your true identity is this: you're really a child of the King, who's now invited to be a part of the King's own household. To be a Christian means saying yes to that invitation to dine at the King's table. To be members of the King's family.

For Mephibosheth that King was King David. For you and me, that King is Jesus. What is our reply?

Part 2: Joel (Joel 2:1-11)

We're continuing our series *Obscure Characters*, where we look at some of the less well known people in the Bible and we see what we can learn from them. Last week we looked at Mephibosheth. This week we meet a man called Joel.

Joel is what they call a Minor Prophet. Now that doesn't mean he wasn't an important prophet. What he had to say was very important. Prophets in the OT are divided up into Major and Minor Prophets, depending on how long their writings are. Isaiah's a major prophet because his prophecy is 66 chapters long, but Joel's just three chapters long. So that makes him a 'minor' prophet. He's concise!

So let me tell you everything we know about Joel himself, [*silence*]. That's right. We know almost nothing at all about him. Oh, except the name of his father. His father was called Pethuel. But we don't know anything about him either. How about the date he gave his prophecy from God? We don't know. Experts say it could have been any time between the 8th century to the 4th century BC, a period of 4 centuries! It's most likely he lived some time between the 6th century and the 4th century BC, but we don't even know that for sure.

We do know what his name means. It means 'Yahweh is God'. Now, *Yahweh* is an English version of the name of God. It used to be translated *Jehovah*. So basically, Joel's name means 'God alone is the true God'. But that still doesn't tell us anything about the man.

So where's he from? Well, we don't really know that either. He's probably from the Jerusalem area. And he might have been linked to the Temple in Jerusalem, but there's no evidence that he was a priest. So that's it. A man prophesying from God, in Jerusalem, around 400 to 600 years before Jesus.

With Joel, the man's a mystery and all we have is the message he delivered from God to the people of his day. So we're looking not so much at the man, as at his message. And to help us do that, I'm going to take each the letters of his name, and use them to unpack something from his message: J-O-E-L.

Judgement (1:1-2:11): Joel is one of the most visual books of the Bible. It paints pictures. And the main picture in the book of Joel is a plague of locusts. Joel describes a plague of locusts, descending on the land and stripping away all its vegetation, leaving a wasteland.

It's something that often used to happen in that part of the world. In fact, it's happened in more recent times too. You get millions of locusts carried up on winds from Arabia. And the thing about locusts is that they grow quickly from being a larva, or little grub, into full grown locusts, which look like big grasshoppers but are far more destructive.

At each stage, the locust has an insatiable appetite. It'll completely strip away anything that's green for miles around. It's worse than an invading army. Nothing at all survives. So you can imagine what the effect is when you've got millions of these creatures swarming.

Why is Joel describing this plague of locusts? Well, almost certainly because that's what's just happened in his country. They've had a massive plague of locusts destroying everything in sight. In fact, biologists tell us that Joel's descriptions of what it's like when a plague of locusts descends are bang on target, down to their smell and the noises they make. It's a literal description of a plague of real locusts.

But Joel doesn't stop there. He sees in this plague of locusts a sign, a warning about something in the future. And that's the Day of Judgement, the day when God judges the hearts of all people. In fact, Joel often slips between the language of locusts, and language that pictures God as the head of an army, judging the evil in the world. It's a warning from God that if his people don't change their attitudes and lifestyles, an even more devastating force than locusts is going to hit them.

Incidentally, there's another aspect to this picture of the locusts. For centuries, Israel had been counting on God to protect them from enemies. And one of the images they used for this protection was winged 'cherubim'. Now these weren't the fat babies you see in later art, but mysterious, sphinx-like creatures. In fact, the original cherubim were carved on the so-called ark of the covenant, the holiest of all the objects in the Temple.

Winged beings, to protect God's people. But now here's an frightening and ironic reversal: God sends winged warriors all right, but they're coming as an image of judgement.

The message of Joel is that God is not only a God of love and mercy, but also a God of judgement. We'd all much rather hear only about the love of God. But here Joel puts the other side of the coin. That God's not a tame pussycat, or a nice grandad, who'll tolerate anything, indefinitely.

The God we see in the Bible is awesome and holy. He won't stand for injustice and exploitation. Or people ignoring him and making their own God-substitutes. There are two sides to God's mercy. One side is that God keeps on loving, and giving people more chances to turn things around and start again. The other side of the coin is that there will be a day when people's hearts will be judged. And on that day all unfaithfulness, all injustice, all evil, will be done away with.

The message of the locusts is a warning, to the people of Israel and, by extension, to us too. God's loving and merciful, but he's also utterly holy, and won't stand by and watch evil prevail. One day he'll judge the earth. And the only things that will survive are the things that are really durable.

Our Way (2:12-17): Why did God give his people pictures of judgement to shake them up? Well, here you've got to go back to basics. What's the point of life in the first place? People were made to live in relationship with God and each other, and to live according to God's guidelines. According to the Bible, that's the point of being human: loving God, loving people, and living God's way.

But most of the time, people go their own way and live for themselves, rather than living God's way. That's where the message of Joel comes in. Even God's own people are doing their own thing and forgetting God. People are going their own way. In their own lives and communities they're re-enacting that scene from the Garden of Eden where people put personal autonomy above faith and trust in God. The pictures of destruction are a warning, to bring them to their senses. We only get one life: how are we living it? Our way or God's way?

Empowering of the Spirit (2:28-32): Despite all the images of judgement, God doesn't stop being a God of mercy and compassion. Through Joel, God promises that judgement won't have the last word. He's going to restore in abundance all the greenery that the locusts have eaten. The land won't remain barren for ever. Things are going to start growing again. And again, this is Joel speaking for God in picture language (READ 2:22,.).

The locusts represented God's judgement. This image of a green and well-watered landscape represents God's blessing. What it can be like to live in relationship with God and follow his ways. In fact, God doesn't only promise to restore what the locust's taken. He promises something even better than what was destroyed (READ: 2:28, 29).

A day's coming, says God, when people won't be floundering around trying to live for him. But they'll have God's own Spirit living in their hearts, empowering them to love him and live his ways. And one day that happens. But it doesn't happen immediately.

You've got to 'fast forward' several hundred years to the Day of Pentecost, in the book of Acts. When the Holy Spirit of God descends on Jesus's followers in the upper room. Peter addresses the crowd – and what does he say? He quotes this whole passage from Joel. And says: 'Listen, it's happening. Right here, right now! Precisely what Joel prophesied would happen. We're living in the time when prophecy's being fulfilled.'

And from that day on, God's Holy Spirit has been sent into the hearts of people who love God, to empower them, to live lives full of faith and hope and love.

Last Things (Ch 3): Remember, Joel's operating on a lot of different time-scales at once. He's looking at a bleak landscape, ravaged by locusts. That's *in his own day*. That reminds him of the fact that *a day in the future*, God's going to judge the earth. Then God gives him a vision of greenery and lush vegetation as a symbol of what life's like when people in his own day turn back to God.

Then God gives Joel another long-range vision: of a day when God's own Spirit will be poured out on all who ask for him, to empower them to live for God. That's a vision that looks forward to the *day of Pentecost*, and also to the fulfilment of that *in our own day*, as people experience the power of God's Spirit in their lives.

Finally, in Chapter 3, God gives Joel another long-range forecast. He gives him a vision of the new Jerusalem, God's holy city (READ 3:18). It's like the vision you find at the very end of the Bible, in the Book of Revelation. God's wiped all evil off the face of the earth. No more locusts! All that's left is God, his people and a renewed earth, the way it was designed to be from the beginning.

People sometimes talk about heaven, about 'going to heaven when we die'. And usually, what people have in their mind is floating around without a body, like a ghost. People sometimes talk about the body dying but the soul going on for ever. But that's not really the way the Bible talks about eternity. In the Book of Revelation, in Joel, and in so many other places what you get is a stunning vision of heaven and earth coming together: a New Jerusalem, a heaven on earth. In other words, a renewed earth with all the evil destroyed. All the best aspects of our present experience: of love and community and culture, but with all those things that damage and distort and destroy done away with. It's a wonderful vision.

And what about you and me? Will we be souls floating around? That's not the picture the Bible gives. The Christian hope is resurrection - the resurrection of the body. Jesus didn't become a ghost after he died. At Easter, he was resurrected. And in both Hebrew and Greek, the two main languages used in that part of the world at that time, the word resurrection could only mean one thing: a new body. So you read about Jesus after his death eating barbecued fish, and inviting Thomas to touch his hands to show he's solid and not a ghost.

And that's the Christian hope for eternity. Life on a renewed earth, with renewed bodies. At the end of his *Chronicles of Narnia*, CS Lewis puts it this way: 'The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.'

He's talking about the Christian vision of eternity. And that's the same vision of eternity that fired the imagination of a man called Joel, who was writing around two-and-a-half thousand years before CS Lewis. He saw a terrifying vision of judgement in the shape of a swarm of locusts. But he also saw an amazing vision of eternity, an eternity in the presence of God which all our best experiences now can only dimly hint at.

And here's the big question Joel was asking all those years ago: What is there in my life and attitudes that will survive into eternity? And what is there in my life and attitudes that, at the end of the day, are destined to become locust-food?

Part 3: Eunice (2 Timothy 1:1-7) (Sermon for Mothering Sunday)

It's a funny thing – history. Of all the billions of people who've ever lived, each of us only knows the names of a few hundred. Or possibly a few thousand. If we read all the history books on a certain era of history, that would add a few thousand more. But the majority of people who've ever lived don't go down in the history books.

Why? Because people don't consider they've done anything sufficiently important or notorious to be remembered by future generations. People who end up being remembered tend to be national leaders, or military people, or great writers or artists. But even there, it's only the writers and artists who're thought to have made a lasting contribution. Most of the artists from any particular generation will end up at best as a small footnote in a biography of somebody else.

And this is true of the person we're looking at today. We've reached the third and final part of our sermon series '*Obscure Characters*', where we're taking a look at some of the people who appear in the Bible but we don't know much about, or we don't remember so well. And the person we're looking at today is a woman called Eunice. In fact, Eunice would have been completely forgotten by history, if it weren't for a couple of brief references to her in the New Testament.

So let me tell you a bit more about Eunice. She lived in a small city called Lystra, which is in a secluded valley in southern Turkey. Lystra was a Roman city, a Roman colony, but it was also in an independent-minded region of Turkey, that kept its own language till well into the 6th century AD.

At that time there were Jewish people living in lots of the cities of the Roman empire, and keeping their own faith going. And one of the Jewish women who was living in Lystra was a woman called Eunice. And Eunice had married a man who was Greek by background. We don't know his name, but we know he was an important man in the city, because he'd been educated in Greek language and culture.

So you've got the Turkish city of Lystra. And among the people living there are Eunice, who's Jewish by background, and her Greek husband. Her mother Lois also lives in the city. And Eunice and her husband have a son, whose name is Timothy.

About the year 47 AD, somebody else with a Jewish background visits Lystra. And his name is Paul. He talks in particular to members of the Jewish community in the city and tells them what's been happening to him in recent years. In particular, he tells them how he's had a powerful encounter with a man called Jesus, who was the Messiah. In other words, the long-awaited king sent by God. Eunice herself comes to faith in Jesus, as does her mother Lois.

What happens next? Well, nothing very dramatic. Lois brings up her son Timothy, and as he grows up, she shares her faith with him. She encourages him to pray to God. And she introduces him to the stories in the Bible. Now, of course, that would mean what we call the Old Testament. Plus stories about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that she's been told first-hand by Paul. And as Timothy grows, he's given a fantastic education, in faith and history and culture, by his mother Eunice. And by the time he's a young man, he knows the Bible as well as anybody raised in Jerusalem or Nazareth.

A few years after Paul first visited Lystra, he comes back again, to catch up with his old friends and give them some help and support. And while he's there he meets Timothy, who's by now a young man, and he discovers what a strong faith he has. And Paul invites him to be his co-worker and helper. And that's exactly what Timothy does. For most of the rest of Paul's life, Timothy travels with him and shares in his ministry. Now, we know that Timothy doesn't find it easy. He's a naturally shy, timid person. He doesn't like being an upfront leader and speaker. And he doesn't have great health: he's often falling ill.

But two of the books of the New Testament are named after this rather shy, sickly young man. They're letters written by Paul to Timothy. When they're written, Paul is near the end of his life, and he's writing to the person who was his closest friend and co-worker over many years. In some of his earlier letters, Paul tells other people what an outstanding leader Timothy is. He says he's never had a co-worker as good as Timothy. Timothy becomes an essential building block of the early church.

Paul and Timothy changed the course of history. The journeys they made and the work they did literally changed the world. But the person who most influenced Timothy's life, the person who most helped him grow in faith, the person who gave him his unparalleled biblical literacy, wasn't the great Apostle Paul. It was his mother Eunice. All those years she quietly talked to him, prayed with him, told him stories, read to him. That was the biggest influence over Timothy as he grew up.

So Paul writes in his second letter to Timothy (our reading for this morning): 'I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice'. And later in the same letter, he talks about how Timothy's known the Scriptures from his childhood. Paul says: 'Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, *because you know those from whom you learned it*'. Of course he does, it's his mother Eunice!

Today's Mothering Sunday. And the reason Mothering Sunday's important is that it's the one day of the year we celebrate the most important job in the world. Bringing up children. It's not a glamorous job, compared with being a supermodel or a rock star, or the head of a corporation. It's often a thankless job, and it can be exhausting and frustrating. But there's no other job which has a more profound and lasting impact on people's lives. So the message of this morning's service has two parts to it:

- 1) **The first part is a big thank-you to mothers for what they do.** And later in our service, we'll be giving out little posies of flowers to thank mothers.
- 2) The second part of this morning's message from the life of Eunice is this. And it's a message for those of us who're parents with younger children. **Don't be shy in talking to your children about faith in God.** Don't be shy in reading Bible story books appropriate to their age, and saying a simple prayer with them at the end of each day.

Is that indoctrination? Of course not. It's called being a parent. It's what parents have always done: sharing with your children the things that matter to you. It's about bringing up a child to know they're loved by God, and that their life has a purpose. It's about bringing them up with a firm set of values. Bringing them up in a community, and a framework of faith, hope and love. As Timothy found, that was the most precious gift his mother Eunice could possibly give him.

If you have young children, don't be shy in talking to them about faith in God. Don't be shy in reading them Bible story books, and saying a prayer with them at the end of each day. You'll be giving them far more than you realise. And if you've never done this sort of thing before – don't worry! You can start tonight.