

Numbers 26 records the new census of the people of Israel at the end of their travels in the desert. Almost without exception, the entire generation that had rebelled against going into the promised land has died off, and a new generation has arisen. It's also worth noting that this census records the sons of Jacob's sons, and almost exclusively, their sons. God then goes on to give instructions for dividing up the land: 'they will receive it as an inheritance, according to the names of the tribes of the fathers' (Nb 26:55).

From this it is apparent that the land will be divided up on the basis of men. It is at this point that Zelophehad's daughters intervene. They are concerned that the inheritance that should go to their family will be lost, because their father had no sons; this would mean that his 'name' would disappear, and doubtless the land in question would also be lost to someone else, too. In the face of this injustice they approach Moses, Eliezer, the priest, high-ranking officials and the entire community, at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (v2), where God would reveal himself to the people. Moses puts their case to God; the outcome is that God promises that they will receive this inheritance, and makes further provision for succession: in particular, that in the absence of a male heir, the daughter will inherit. Later in the Bible, we learn that the daughters did indeed receive this inheritance (Jos 17-1-6).

So what possible importance could these minutiae of Jewish law have for us today?

Firstly, this story shows us that God is not only interested in the spiritual, non-material aspect of our lives, but also in things that are very much material and practical. Inheritances are very often a source of problems, disputes, and in some cases even murder or war (in researching this question, I discovered that one of the causes of the Hundred Years' War was that the English refused to apply Salic law, which prohibited women from inheriting land, and thus prevented the English from inheriting the French crown!). In this instance, God heard the injustice and opened up a more equitable way.

However, the second thing this narrative reveals is that it is difficult if not impossible to anticipate every possible circumstance in law. The issue of preserving Zelophehad's name appears to be resolved, but a few chapters later the problem comes up again (Nb 36): if the daughters were to marry outside the tribe, the inheritance promised to the tribe as a whole would be diminished. This required a further clarification: Zelophehad's daughters could only marry within their own tribe.

Indeed, social issues are much more complicated than they may at first appear. Before I studied this passage, I had never worried too much about inheritance, all the more so in that I'm an only child. Since then, I've learned that there is absolute primogeniture, male primogeniture, agnatic primogeniture, uterine primogeniture, Salic and semi-Salic law, as well as ultimogeniture, to name but a few alternatives. Often, such practices change as society changes: for instance, in the absence of a national government, it was important to keep family lands together. One system cannot be said to necessarily be better than another; there are many aspects of the context that need to be taken into account.

For Zelophehad's daughters, we can see that their case was not fully settled in this first instance – not even by God. It was more complicated than it looked. From this it is apparent that we cannot expect the Bible to anticipate every possible circumstance that may occur in our daily lives, once and for all. And indeed I would say that this is not a bug but a feature: it reveals something fundamental about the way God interacts with us.

Let's look at the actions of these five daughters more closely. The passage does not tell us whether they approached the community, the nobles, the priest and Moses at the same time or separately, but what is clear is that there was a *collective* aspect to their action, characterised by *discussions*. We also read that they are in front of the Tent of Meeting; in other words, before the presence of God: there was also a *transcendent* aspect to their action. And it was that together, faced with this unprecedented situation, before God, his will was revealed, and led to a new arrangement.

I believe this is an absolutely vital interpretive key if we in turn wish to avoid locking ourselves into a legalistic, and indeed fundamentalist system, bereft of the life and the presence of God. Last week we were considering the words of Jesus as he told the religious leaders that through their traditions, they had succeeded in achieving the exact opposite of the basics of God's law, thereby nullifying the word of God itself (Mk 7:13). The apostle Paul reminds us that the law cannot bring life (Gal 3:21) and that the letter, in isolation, kills (2 Cor 3:6).

Viewed in this light, the Bible is not so much a manual set in stone dictating what we should or should not do in any given circumstance, but rather the story of how those who have sought to follow God went about establishing his will in their particular social, cultural and eschatological context.

We find a similar approach in several instances in the New Testament. I was reminded in particular of what happens when Peter, following a revelation from God

(Acts 10), goes to visit Cornelius, and the non-Jews discover the Gospel. Once again, an unprecedented question arises: should these converts obey the Jewish law or not? At the Council of Jerusalem, after what we are told is a 'lively discussion' (Ac 15:7), we read that it seemed good 'to the Holy Spirit and to us... to the apostles and elders, and to the whole Church' (Acts 15:28,25) to not put any unnecessary obstacle in the way of them being welcomed into the faith. Faced with unprecedented circumstances, we find the same factors in play: a collective discussion with a transcendent aspect.

And so it is that right from the Pentateuch, the Scriptures show themselves to be one element amongst others for the will of God to be done in our lives. Of course, they are inspired by God: in other words, in his sovereignty he has ensured that down through history, we have received these texts as being trustworthy and as revealing his nature and plans in a distinct fashion. The Scriptures are authoritative, but that authority specifies that other aspects are to be taken into account.

The first of these other aspects is ourselves. When we feel that something is not right, God invites us to question him. We can see people doing this ever since Abraham started bargaining with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, through to the widow pestering the wicked judge in the parable, via Job. Zelophehad's daughters stand firmly within this tradition. If they had not taken action, nothing would have happened. Discernment of God's will in our context also entails us taking action; in this way, God encourages us to behave responsibly, and become mature and more like him. This does not happen in isolation: as in Numbers, the Council of Jerusalem in Acts also emphasises the importance of a group discussion, before God, in which we seek to discern his will. Which is precisely why we gather as a church!

The other essential ingredient is the Spirit of God living in and among us. Zelophehad's daughters had to make do with the presence of God manifesting in the Tent of Meeting; whereas the promise of the New Covenant is the Spirit of God poured into the hearts of all those who love him. The Spirit reminds us that we are children of God; he also reminds us of the reality of God's existence, his nature, and his character. Through him, we worship God – in Spirit and in truth. While God does allow us to challenge him, and examine together how we can live out the Gospel in a very practical manner in our own lives and in church life today, the Spirit is also there to imbue us with humility and the fear of God. The idea is not to have some kind of anarchistic mob bent on overthrowing an outmoded, tyrannical God, but, as Paul tells us, to be 'co-workers' with him. What a privilege; what a responsibility; and what a joy. Let's do our utmost to be worthy heirs of the daughters of Zelophehad.