

SERMON: 2018/08/12 (12th Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - 2 Samuel 18:5-9,15,31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2 & John 6:35,41-51

[Invite children to the front.]

I want to ask *you* a question:
Does *everyone* love Jesus?
Hm?
"Yes" or "no"?

[Wait for response.]

I wish they did.
I wish everyone would love Jesus.
But not everyone *does*.
And not everyone *did*:

This morning, for example, we hear that some of the people who had been in the crowd of 5,000, which Jesus fed (by the miracle with the loaves and fishes), 'began to complain about Him' [v.41].
Forgetting how He had helped them, they became angry and frustrated.
And what annoyed them in particular was Jesus' claim that He had "'come down from Heaven'". [v.42]
They thought it was *a lie!*
That Jesus was *a liar*.
Can you imagine?

Well, even if we find it hard to believe that someone might distrust Jesus, many people, actually, struggle to accept His teachings and 'way'.
They find it *too hard*, or *too challenging*; *too uncomfortable* or *far-fetched*.

But Jesus models for us - shows us - how to respond:
And that's not to change the message, but to keep *insisting* on it.
So He says again, *for the second time* - like last week [v.35]- "I am *the bread* [of life]." [v.48]
And then again, (for a third time), "I am *the [living] bread*..." [v.51]
Don't forget this!
It is too important.

Let's pray: Father God, help us to be persistent as we speak your truth, and not give up - or give in - when we're challenged by those who doubt, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

A lot of time has elapsed between the (unhappy) events we were discussing last week and the episode relayed in today's Old Testament reading.

Years, in fact.

David is now well into the autumn of his life and reign; his vigour and peacock-ing are behind him.

And, in some respects, he's done very well as ruler of God's people, Israel.

But, we learn today, his successes have begun to be obscured by a new crisis: civil war - a struggle against one of his very own children, "Absalom."

And as we come to ponder this tragedy, it is worth remembering Nathan the seer's warning from before:

"... Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and...I will do this thing before all Israel..." [2 Sam. 12:7-13]

So, how did we get here?

How did we arrive at this Macbeth-ean/George R. R. Martin moment?

Well, David married Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, but, as the prophet predicted [v.14], the child that they conceived together in adultery didn't long live beyond birth[v. 18].

(Later, though, she bore him another, more famous son, "Solomon,"[v.24] (and, "spoiler alert," we will be looking at him next week).)

The battle that was being waged at the time of the king's infidelity - to capture the Ammonite's capital, Rabbah - and in which Uriah was killed - ended in an Israelite victory: Joab, their general, seems to have devised a clever stratagem of first capturing - what our author calls - the enemy's 'water city':

Now, here, admittedly, the text is vague, and '[c]ontinuous rebuilding[, in Transjordan], especially in modern times, has destroyed so much that it is seldom possible to discern the [layout of the original settlement],[n.1] but the best guess - by archaeologists - is that the city (of the time) was divided into at least *two* parts - both fortified - one in the valley on the banks of the nearest river, the "Jabbok," and another, 'royal'[v.26] part - a citadel - on a high hill,[n.2] and '[t]he two were connected by a long underground passageway', through which servants and soldiers could travel more-or-less undisturbed.[n.3]

David's forces seem to have severed *this* vital artery by seizing the lower, humbler part of town; and he was then invited, by his loyal commander, to have the glory of concluding the siege against the now very thirsty defenders in the other section

where they were “holed up” with their monarch, “Milcom.”

We’re told that David ‘took the crown’ and began to wear it as his own [v.30], implying, in other words, that he made Ammon a vassal state, transforming Israel from a kingdom *to an empire*. (If a small one.)

(The men that surrendered to him were “carted off” to perform “hard labor” in “chain-gangs.” [v.31])

And ‘[t]his is one of the last glimpses given of the David of old, the boldly confident warrior who effortlessly accomplished his ends.’ [n.4]

Now, when he was a young man and contending with his predecessor, Saul, David, to consolidate his burgeoning position, had married a number of wives - the daughters or sisters of various regional notables; and had a *whole* brood of children by them. [See: 2 Sam. 3:2-5]

And these all came to live with him in Jerusalem, where the atmosphere became very tense between them.

Amnon, the ‘firstborn’ and heir, raped one of his half-sisters, Tamar, and then, disgusted by his own incestuous depravity, maligned her. [2 Sam. 13:1-22]

To avenge this outrage, *her* nearest related brother, *Absalom*, ambushed their eldest sibling at a party, struck him dead when he was drunk, and then fled into exile. [v.24-38]

But, eventually, David’s anger against Absalom mellowed [v.39] - not unsurprising given the cause of the murder, and had him fetched back. [14:21-23]

However, still harbouring some lingering resentment, he wouldn’t allow his son to return to live with him in the palace, only elsewhere in the city. [v.24]

Although glad to be back home, Absalom was indignant that his father didn’t entirely sympathise with what seemed to him to be a fully justified response to the treatment of his sister, and resented being held “at arm’s length.”

Indeed, he became *very* embittered; and set fire to some fields belonging to Joab [v.30], the warrior who, as I mentioned before, had helped elevate David to his lofty, imperial status.

And, in the argument that followed, David ended up taking his son’s side.

Reinstated, and closer to the throne in *every* way, Absalom began riding around the city and its suburbs in a chariot [15:1a], which, being ‘typical of Canaanite and Philistine royalty was probably intended as a public display of his intentions to replace his father as king.’ [n.5]

Certainly, some men of influence were won over by this cocksure posturing [v.6b], and a conspiracy was hatched. [v.10-12]

Hearing this, one of the questions that might arise in your mind is, “Why? Why would anyone abandon David, who had been so visibly chosen by the creator

Himself to lead?" [1 Sam. 16:13]

And one of the clues in the text is that Absalom approached - and found! - 'the tribes' for support: [15:10].

This is a significant little detail:

the monarchy, you see, was predicated on - backed by - an emerging professional military corps, of trained, salaried soldiers;

and this group was beginning to usurp the role traditionally played by the tribal militiamen (from the provinces), who would supplement the income from their farming by pillaging in wartime.[n.6]

Whatever the reason, 'David's retreat from [his own capital], ...suggests that the number of units supporting the revolt was substantial, too substantial for [him] to deal with [even on what should have been his home-turf]'.[n.7]

On-the-run - and seemingly outnumbered - the king wasn't beaten yet.

He divided his bodyguard into three units[18:2]

and put them into the "field" to act under their own direction: verse 4 - "Whatever seems best to you...do." he tells the leaders, and, like that, he places the *entire* outcome in the LORD's hands.

Again, the text is frustratingly vague, but this trio of "battalions" appears to have converged on Absalom's larger force as it was passing through a 'dense' forest on 'uneven ground'. In this difficult terrain, the bigger army couldn't bring its advantage of numbers to bear on the guerrillas, who picked them off using 'hit-and-run' tactics.[n.8]

From one of these bloody engagements, Absalom tried to flee, and in a moment of hilarious, Monty Python-esque comedy, was "swept" from his horse and caught in the "fork" of some branches, and left suspended by his head, with his legs flailing and kicking at the (empty) air.

Then, probably almost wetting themselves with laughter, some of David's troops surrounded this human piñata, and killed him.[v.9-15]

And the news breaks David's heart.

Rather than rejoicing, we hear that he 'wept'.[v.33]

But what can we learn from this?

The Scriptures, as much as they (do)entertain, have a greater, *deeper* purpose: To unveil to us the mind of the One who made us.[2 Tim. 3:16]

And *here* - this unpleasantness with Absalom, which has proved to be '[t]he bulk of the book [of 2nd Samuel]'.[n.9] - exposes a number of truths, such as this: that sin is its own Hell - although sometimes you have to be patient to see the consequences; and, conversely, righteousness - *holy* living - is its own Heaven.

And by that I'm not suggesting these aren't also very real, *tangible* realities the knowledge of which should shape our daily decision-making - Jesus Himself, the 'word [of] God', [Jn. 1:1, also 1:14] attests to their existence beyond the grave on the Day of the Lord: [e.g. Mt. 11:23; Lk. 16:23, etc.]. But, David's life, like a petri-dish under a microscope, also reveals with bold lines and in vivid color that there are rewards and punishments to be had right now in this life:

You know, I didn't say anything before as I was summarising his misadventures, but at a number of junctures we hear of how David, as he retreated from his son, was brought food and supplies from all kinds of different people [see: 2 Sam. 16:1 & 17:27-29].

And it is shame that our edited version omits these episodes, for they demonstrate how David's general benevolence (as a ruler) had impacted his subjects - *benefitted* them; and of the power - *the infectiousness* - of kindness.

Thus, just as we are warned in the Gospels by our Savior that "violence begets violence" [see: Mt. 26:52], so doing good engenders more of the same.

This is why Christians are called upon to distinguish ourselves by works of charity and neighbourliness, not to *earn* salvation - which is impossible, but to transform all of the world that God cares for, *even* for persistent sinners.

And in doing this we become, in fact, '*imitators* of God' - to borrow a phrase from today's *Ephesians* extract [5:1]: (*Matthew* 5:45), 'for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.'

This isn't the usual way to behave.

The *natural* way.

No.

That is to hit back when we're hit; to shout when we're shouted at; to criticise our critics.

But David - *flawed*, lustful, impetuous David - gives us now a glimpse of the Divine - *of the Cross!* [See: Eph. 2:13] - when he weeps for his murderous son, and wishes he might have died in his stead - *as a substitute*; and then, in the following chapter, grants amnesty to the conspirators who sought to assassinate him: [e.g. 2 Sam. 19:18b-23].

If, then, last week, you felt superior to him, now *he* sets *us* a remarkably ambitious standard to aspire to: *Christ's*.

Let's reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Wimmer, Donald H. (2000), 'Rabbah', in Freedman, David Noel & Myers, Allen C. (Eds.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, Grand Rapids, M. I.; Cambridge, U. K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1105.
2. See the notes for verses twenty-six to thirty-one at the bottom of page 463 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: An Ecumenical Study Bible* (2007), Oxford: Oxford University Press; or, alternatively, those for verses twenty-six and twenty-seven on page 260 in Gordon, Robert P. (1986), *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Regency Reference Library (Zondervan Publishing House). See also: Fisher, James Roger (July 1998), 'Ammon in the Hebrew Bible: a Textual Analysis and Archaeological Context of Selected References to the Ammonites of Transjordan', PhD Thesis, Andrews University Seventh-Day Adventist Theological Seminary, 114, 119-120; and Burdajewicz, Mariusz (1993), 'Rabbath-Ammon', in Stern, Ephraim; Lewinson-Gilboa, Ayelet & Aviram, Joseph (Eds.), *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land: Volume 4*, Jerusalem: The Israel Exploration Society, pp. 1243-1249.
3. Wimmer (2000), 1105.
4. Barron, Robert (2015), *2 Samuel (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Brazos Press (Baker Publishing Group), 12.
5. Gabriel, Richard A. (2003), *The Military History of Ancient Israel*, Westport, C. T.: Greenwood Publishing, 269.
6. *Ibid.*, 270. (Top of the page.)
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 273-274.
9. McKenzie, Steven L. (2000), *King David: A Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 138.