

David's Lament – 2 Samuel 1: 1, 17-21 & Mark 5: 21-43
A sermon for Sunday 27 June 2021 by Rev Phil Wootton

'How the mighty are fallen in battle.' The words of David's lament over Saul and Jonathan echo down through the centuries. These sonorous words resonate with experience, not only of those who receive the dread war office telegrams informing of loss through enemy action, but also of all who fallen, not by human hand, but by the invisible threat we find so hard to fight. Our loved-ones may not be kings or soldiers, but they are 'mighty' to us, 'heroic' to us, because they are loved by us. David's circumstances may be very different from ours, but his lament is a bold attempt to find words where words are in short supply.

Just how hard it is to find the right words was put emphatically in an interview I watched last week with Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Abichie. She has written about the experience of losing her father last year, saying: 'Grief is a cruel kind of education. You learn how ungentle mourning can be, how full of anger. You learn how glib condolences can feel. You learn how much grief is about language, the failure of language, and the grasping for language.'

David does the difficult work of finding words to speak the unspeakable. His grief is intensely personal – especially for Jonathan, his boyhood friend, but he also fulfils the leader's role by articulating collective grief for public figures. So, he speaks of their personal abilities, 'swifter than eagles, stronger than lions'; and what they meant to him – Saul, who gave a vision of splendour; Jonathan, who gave the great gift of friendship. A soldier himself, David knows the ugly reality of the battlefield, but he insists theirs are noble deaths. They are the 'glory of Israel', lying dead on the heights – and 'glory of Israel' is a phrase usually reserved for God himself. He expresses something we may feel but not dare to say: the death of those we love is an outrage: it puts creation out of sync. It's a defilement. You cannot, must not, just let it pass by. He concludes with a final, poignant sentence: 'In life, they were loved and gracious, and in death they were not parted... How the mighty are fallen.'

A couple of years ago I visited the northern Spanish town of Guernica, famed as the first place really to suffer what became the fate of so many – carpet bombing from the sky – by the Fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War. In that place I saw a reproduction of Picasso's famous painting, 'Guernica'. In it is that same sense of outrage that death has ripped apart the fabric of reality as we know it, splintering normal shapes and forms, saying the world will never be the same again. Today, in our times, in response to the great losses we have suffered over the last 18 months, whether it's as individuals or the shared losses of the community, we need to be able to articulate grief. We need to be able to lament, to name it, to shout out, if necessary, to challenge God over it – for feels like God's good ordering of creation has been shaken. We know we can shout it at God, because God is big enough to take it.

I'm also reminded something else – when on pilgrimage in the Holy Land, of meeting a group of bereaved parents – a mixed group of Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews all of whom had lost children in the tragic conflicts of that land. One father described his grief as like splitting the atom – an extraordinary force, which can be directed productively (as with a nuclear power station) or destructively, as for an atom bomb. He had committed himself to using this 'nuclear energy' to work for reconciliation. How will we direct our energies as we come out of pandemic and look towards the new world?

David turned his grief into action. He was energised into gathering supporters, listening to God, establishing a headquarters, fighting new battles. He directed his energies into becoming king. I would like to say he had a great and divinely inspired vision for kingship – that he saw the value of a monarchy that would unite the many tribes of Israel; for a capital city strategically placed on the edge of the tribal lands of Judah and Benjamin; for a Temple there where all Israel would come to worship; for a kingdom that would truly display what it is to be God’s covenant people. But we simply don’t know. The Bible doesn’t tell us. We do know David has grown up from the little red-faced shepherd boy of Nazareth, whose qualities and potential were seen only by God. We do know he has moved on from the unlikely hero who defeated the giant Goliath with naïve faith and a pebble. We do know he has learnt the confusion and ambiguities of adult life – not least life at Saul’s court where he could shift from being royal favourite and court musician to outlawed traitor hunted across Israel at the whim of a jealous monarch.

We can see him now an established tribal chief in Judah, southern-most of the tribes of Israel, and with Saul and Jonathan dead, there are threats on every side, but also an opportunity to put his new energies into becoming king. What are reported are his battles and campaigns, and, it seems, his profiting from an awful lot of convenient deaths. In fact, it reminds me of when I was a hockey player, for a few years I played alongside a fellow fullback of whom it was said you’d never see him commit a foul, but opposition players just seemed to fall down around him. When David’s potential rivals fell by the sword, David wasn’t there. Does the king protest too much? Politics is a very murky world.

However, one thing seems pretty clear: David never forgets he was called out and chosen by God through the prophet Samuel, and he has been anointed to be king by Samuel for God. Although we hear far less of his faith, as he operates in this morally turbulent world, there is enough to show he is following the vocation given him by God. This is not to say the ends justify the means, but rather that God’s purposes move forward through the very murky business of human affairs. We listen to the daily news, and we wonder what on earth is going on? How can God let it come to this? Ours is to do what is right, day by day, in the circumstances we find ourselves in, and to trust God for the bigger picture.

After all that murkiness, and all our lament, let’s close by turning our attention to the Lord of Life – the one truly anointed of the Lord. The Gospel reading gives us two stories combined – one of a man of status and the other of a woman from the margins; one a central figure of his community, brought to his knees by the terminal illness of his daughter; the other a woman broken physically by illness, socially by the shame of continual haemorrhaging, economically by massive doctor’s bills. The woman reaches out her hand to touch Jesus’ robe with tentative and yet daring faith. The synagogue leader invites Jesus into his home, at the point when all hope has been lost. Both find their situations transformed. Both find their faith, however inadequate, vindicated. Pain, devastation and grief do not have the last word. There is a time to lament. And there is a time to move forward. Jesus reached out his hand to the girl, and said, ‘Stand up and walk’. There is life again!