

**Pentecost 3**  
**21/6/2009**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 32 - 49**

**Psalm 9**

**2 Corinthians 6:1 - 13**

**Mark 4:35 - 41**

### **Five smooth stones: living in the strength of God**

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The reading from Samuel marks a new chapter in Israel's tradition of faith. Having lived for many years with God as their only sovereign, supported by the charismatic leadership of prophets and judges, Israel slowly made the transition to monarchical rule. There may have been some reluctance about this. The negative memory of the kingly rule exercised by Pharaoh in Egypt was deeply embedded in Israel's faith story. And there was a theological question: if Israel had its own king, how would the sovereignty of God be exercised? The answer comes just prior to reading for today. Samuel the prophet was commissioned to anoint the one who was to rule of Israel under God. Samuel was sent to the home of the patriarch Jesse where he examined six of his sons without success. At the last minute the seventh, David came in from tending the sheep, and God declared he was the one Samuel was to anoint. We see this pattern repeatedly in scripture: God works in an upside down way. God chose the least likely candidate. Despite the many ways David later demonstrated profound human weaknesses, the hand of God was in his ascent, and his name still epitomises the ideal of biblical kingship. It was some time before the people acknowledged David as their king but his emergence was prevenient: it came about because of the grace that goes before us, and is given before we ask.

David's confrontation with Goliath has about it shades of the contest between Moses and Pharaoh and brings into focus a theological conflict that had other dimensions to it as well. The image of Goliath conveys the impression of the Philistines as a powerful people who scorned the God of Israel, and kept control of the technological revolution of those days. Earlier (1 Sam 13:19-20) the writer tells us: *Now there was no smith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said: 'the Hebrews must not make swords of spears for themselves'.* So all the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen their ploughshares, mattocks and sickles. (It was the equivalent of having to go to New Zealand or Singapore to get your computer fixed!) The clash was between earthly power, symbolised by superior physical and military strength, and the simplicity of trust in the power of Godly wisdom and natural gifts.

David's presence in war zone was due to his role as delivery boy, ferrying food from his father's estate to the troops. King Saul and the soldiers are paralysed with fear, but David who is no warrior has a boyish interest in seeing some of the action. When he volunteers to challenge Goliath and tells of his contest with lions and bears, it looks like an inflated example of self-credentialing: but it is not. The theological subtext is, God delivered him. The word he uses for deliverance resonates deeply with every deliverance at the hands of God Israel knew in its history. In the upcoming battle David will contest in the name of the living God, the Lord of armies, who delivers the small and the weak.

The scene where David is fitted with Saul's armour is comical, but its theological point is that he will not fight as the kings of nations normally do, clothed in the complete trappings of political and military power. He will fight in humility and simplicity, using the gifts and skills he had to hand. And secretly, he will fight as the anointed one, gifted with the Spirit of God. To an outsider it looked like David had no other resources at his disposal, but he is the first to mention the name of God in this story. In this is the key to understanding how he prevailed over Goliath, without a sword. It is not that the others are cowards. The difference is: David did not doubt the meaning of God's deliverance in Israel's history. He acted in trust of the God of Israel, whose nature is to save. He abandoned advanced technology and careful military strategies. He chose five smooth stones and in the strength of the God who delivers and saves prevailed over the monster Goliath, symbol of all that is gross, disdainful and blasphemous. This story is a witness to the power of the living God: a power beyond us, whom we have trouble naming and believing. This is the one who is present to us, and uses smallness, weakness and things that otherwise look simple and foolish, to accomplish the divine purpose in the world. The five smooth stones are a symbol of David's choice to live in the sovereignty of the living God.

Israel was no stranger to stones. Jacob used a stone for a pillow when he dreamed of a ladder between heaven and earth and declared that God was present to him, when he least expected that to be so. Stones were frequently used to mark places where people believed heaven and earth were joined. David's five smooth stones signal that his humble earthly strength is held within the power of God who works to defeat the reign of blasphemy and oppression. In the history of symbols, five is a number that, like Jacob's stone, represents the marriage between heaven and earth. When the Uniting Church turned 25 Davis McCaughey quipped, in relation to the number five: three for the trinity and two for the two natures of Christ. And we might add, it was the power of One that triumphed over Goliath. This is a bit of old style Early Church reflection on an aspect of the text, but we can take it further. Everything here means something and five has at least two other references to reflect upon. There are five points in the Bethlehem star, which drew the nations to worship at the cradle of the greatest Son of David, in a context where a vicious king used all his political power and cunning to eradicate the gift of grace from amongst us. And if we reflect on the death of him who was born in Bethlehem, there were five wounds: two hands, two feet and one side. Five wounds lead us to the place where heaven and earth is joined in the presence of God among us as the wounded one, at work for our and redemption, when humanity did all in its power to resist the gift. Five reveals what we find hard to imagine: in woundedness redemption is found. Deliverance will come not through clothing ourselves with the outward signs of worldly strength, but in being prepared to receive and embrace the wounds of God, wounds that help us see the shape and depth of our folly and frailty as humans. If we are brave enough to look at the place where things break, we may find the spot where real strength emerges. A strength that will topple whatever Goliath we face, because it is the strength of another.

And we do face many Goliaths, personally in the form of our demons, and as threats to our health and wellbeing. As a nation and as a world we face many confusing choices over what path to take as we confront an uncertain future. What measures will we take, and what sovereignty will we choose to rely on for support?

Ten days ago in this church the Vice Chancellor of the Bethlehem University described the conditions under which Palestinians in the West Bank live. It is an occupied territory that is constantly and being encroached upon, fenced off, and deprived of resources, especially water. The steady addition of dividing walls render it more like a concentration camp than a place to live. A ferocious army, which lacks humanity and proper accountability before international law, constantly and in ever-new ways, imposes these conditions. It is not difficult to see who is Goliath in this situation. In 1973 the Vatican chose to support the Palestinians by providing in that place accessible, empowering education that steadily builds hope and strength for the inhabitants, especially young people. A University exists in occupied territory because a church that lives under the sovereignty of a wounded Christ heard the call of wounded ones in the world. It chose to embrace that suffering for the sake of trying to redeem an oppressed people. The choice to offer education to young people in a war zone was like selecting smooth stones to confront a war machine. But the smooth stones come with the gift of grace and hope. They open up a future for those who otherwise would have none. And those who offer them say: "walls do not last they always come down". Freedom has a way of breaking through because freedom is a gift of God that in the wounded Christ has conquered every form of death. Thanks be to God who calls us to live in the strength of simplicity and wisdom reflected in the gift of five smooth stones.

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