

Sunday 19
9/8/2015

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 11:1-15

Psalm 14

Matthew 16:13-23

A very naughty boy, but still a messiah

The story of David and Bathsheba and that of David and Goliath are perhaps the best known of all the recorded events of David's life. And, for that reason, we will not dwell on the details of the obvious: that one should not do as David did: adultery (or here, perhaps, even a rape) is contrary to the law of God, and murder is as well. There is not much to be said for harping on this particular point in a sermon because it's not that hard: if you are contemplating either adultery or murder, stop it. Enough said. There are more interesting things to consider there.

Perhaps the most interesting thing is this: David has been *anointed* king. This means that he is a "messiah" (from the Hebrew) or a "christ" (from the Greek), for this is what those words mean both mean: "anointed one." Jesus is not the first christ; he is the last. Our story today, then, presents us with a strange coming-together: unlike another well-known "religious" figure, not only is David a "very naughty boy", he is *also* "the Messiah". How can this be so?

Up until now we have seen a steady building up of blessing upon blessing for David. There is a sense in which, until this point, God has been setting David in place. Now God waits to see what David will do, and the results are underwhelming. David is set over the people *for* the people. In his being blessed is Israel promised security and peace from its enemies (2 Samuel 7.10). This is his role: to be a god-like enabler of what is true and gives life.

David's failure, then, is not simply a personal moral offence. Much more, his failure affects the whole community. Rather than being one who brings life, David takes it. First, of course, is Bathsheba, either encouraged or forced out of her life with Uriah; then comes Uriah himself and then, unintended, Bathsheba's baby.

More generally, however, there is also the matter of the curse which we will hear God speak next week on the house he has just blessed.

Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. 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 neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun."

This curse affects not just David and his family but, through them, on the whole community. It cannot be hidden but will spill out into the open for all to see. The sword which will cut through David's sons, in doing so, cuts through the security and identity of Israel as a whole.

Instead of being the one who preserves life, David becomes now the one who causes blood to flow. In a way, he has always been this – whether it was the blood of those wild animals which threatened his flock, or the blood of Philistines who were a threat to

Israel. But, as we have noted in reflecting on the Goliath story, this is the blood of rather one-dimensional characters in the story. They are, in a sense, outside of what really matters for those who tell this story. They represent disorder and chaos, but specifically from without. What David does to repel these threats is done to protect the sphere of Israel, a kind of bringing of order to the disordered void, to recall the creation narrative (Genesis 1.1).

But what happens *within* the sphere of the chosen and blessed Israel is a different matter for reflection altogether. And this comes now to its sharpest focus in the person of David himself. For here *is* Israel – represented in the king – secured by God’s hand, blessed, as a son to God as a father, called to faithfulness, called to *be* a son. And here also is Israel fallen. And the effect is devastating: the loss of the first and beloved son – God’s and David’s – and the loss of many more to come.

When the blessed one over-reaches, death is what results. But this is not an occasional failure; it goes to the heart of human being. As we have already noticed a number of times: here is repeated the story of Eden:

And the Lord God commanded [Adam], ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die’ (Genesis 2.16f NRSV)

In effect God says there, “Everything but this”. That story ends with the question to Eve: “What is this that you have done?”, whereupon follows the curse upon the serpent and the man and the woman.

In our story today, Bathsheba is David’s “apple”. The death of Uriah is David’s fig leaf. And the death of the child and the curse of the sword which follow are David’s expulsion from Eden and from all the possibilities of the brotherhood of Cain and Abel. It is a troubled and grey existence David lives from now on – the existence of the children of Adam and Eve.

If the story of Adam and Eve resonates with that of David, the stark scriptural *contrast* to David’s story is that of Jesus. In response to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am,” (Matthew 16.13) comes Peter’s bold affirmation, “You are the Messiah” or, we might paraphrase, “You are the anointed one, the son of David,.” But then, just because he recognises this link, Peter goes on to reveal that he expects the kind of kingship which David had exercised. As Jesus describes his approaching persecution and death, Peter rebukes him: “This shall never happen to you!” What shall never happen? The kind of exposure which David tried to avoid: being known or seen to have failed in righteousness, to have been unimaginably wrong – David, of all people; Jesus, of all people. David is going to be publically exposed as a sinner – we still read the story even today; Jesus, he says, will be exposed in the same way on the cross.

Or, at least, whereas David *is* wrong; Jesus *looks* wrong, to the extent that the cross is interpreted by his executioners as God’s judgement on his proclamation. Peter knows that in every respect Jesus is great David’s *greater* son, that no prophet Nathan will finger Jesus with the charge, “You are the man” (to anticipate next week’s reading [2 Samuel 12]; consider, however, Pilate’s presentation of Jesus: “Behold the man” [John 19.5]). But the similarities are important.

We have noted many times that David and Adam “refer” to each other, the one (re-)enacting the other’s possibilities and shortcomings. They each embody the story of blessing and over-reaching. Jesus as a figure in the story also “refers” to David and Adam – he invokes them for us and embodies them. This he does, first, in a positive

sense as a representative figure who is blessed with life in God's kingdom. Adam is blessed, David is blessed, Jesus is blessed. But Jesus also invokes and embodies Adam and David in a second, negative sense: as the bearer of the curse of death.

Technically, scholars call Adam and David "types" of each other – and of Jesus. This means that Adam and David lay down a pattern which is seen in Jesus: they are "typical" of each other; it happens to each of them according to the pattern. (The notion comes from Paul, who speaks of Adam as "a type [Greek "tupos" = pattern, model] of one who was to come" (Romans 5. 14).). In this way they are all seen, in their different ways, to be sharing in the same kind of reality, seen to be the same *kind* of thing.

This way of thinking helps us to see the threads which are woven through the whole of fabric of the biblical story, now above it and visible, now below and hidden, but always the source of its colour and contrast and cohesion.

The crucifixion of Jesus is the rejection of the humanity he embodies, the rejection of his peculiar freedom before God and others. But here is the crucial point: to the extent that Jesus shares in the pattern of blessed opportunity which is where Adam and David begin, the crucifixion of the *innocent* Jesus reveals a kind of *self*-contempt on the part of his executioners – a covering over of what we do not want to see as a possibility for ourselves. The crucifixion is another fig leaf mistaken for the finest of coverings. The humanity of Jesus is a kind of nakedness – an openness before God and those around him – which is found to be unbearable. In a strange kind of way, the murdered Uriah can be reclaimed here as a "type" of Jesus. He dies that the sin of David might be covered – a fig leaf to cover David's nakedness before the people, if not before God. The days of David happily dancing naked before God and the people are now past (Recalling the under-dressed dancing David of 2 Samuel 6.1-23, especially vv.20ff); a modesty borne of sin is now required.

Jesus dies in order that his remarkable humanity might be covered over – blotted out. But if David's shame brought modesty, the shame inflicted upon Jesus on the cross becomes by God's grace the basis of a strange *immodesty*: the freedom of the forgiven children of God. Now revealed sin brings not the shame of exposure and the darkened existence which comes with that, but rather *celebration*: God can overcome even this.

I began by suggesting the real question arising from the Bathsheba affair is the question about why David continues to enjoy God's favour: how the messiah – the anointed one – and the "naughty boy" might be one and the same. There is no good reason for this, so far as most of us are concerned. This is not least because we are, most of us most of the time, interested mainly in ourselves, *our* mores, *our* morals. When the failure is of sufficient magnitude the one who failed becomes irredeemable, cast "outside the city gate" (as is said of Jesus: Hebrews 13.12.). These ones cease to matter. Our modern correlates are our fallen idols – celebrities, politicians, sporting heroes – who offend public decency in some way.

But, mercifully, it is not we but God who judges and pronounces sentence where it really matters. God wants this to work – this project we call "life". This is the point of the promise to David: "Always"; you are *mine*, always. God so much wants this to work that he sends his Son as the son of one of us, that we might see, and believe, and so have hope, in whatever illicit embrace we might find ourselves, willing or unwilling.

There is no justifying David in his taking of Bathsheba, his murder of Uriah or any other excess we might find in his history, but can be no self-righteous judging of him either. For his story is ours. It is beyond none of us to want more than is given, to cover

up what we've had to do to get it, and to be in need of being shown that there is a God who sees.

That is the Law. It is the *gospel*, however, that to know ourselves truly seen by God is to know ourselves forgiven.

Mine. You are mine. Always.

For such a gospel of grace and the love which is its guarantee, all thanks and praise be to God. Amen.
