

Pentecost 5
1/7/2012

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 1:17 - 27

Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 8:7 - 15

Mark 5:21 - 43

David's Lament over Saul and Jonathan

Sermon preached by Rev Dr Morag Logan

This year in the cycle readings set in the lectionary we are spending several weeks covering the story of David, Israel's most renowned king. We do so in by reading a series of separated, brief texts, giving us snapshots of episodes in David's rise to power, then his reign.

We read a couple of weeks ago of his anointing by Samuel, the youngest of the sons of Jesse; we read about David's slaying of the giant; now we read David's lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, deaths which leave David's way clear to ascend to the throne. This touching on the story at points by the lectionary gives us one, quite particular précis of the story. It is well worth reading the whole thing. And if you have not sat down and read the books of Samuel in their entirety for a while, I thoroughly recommend it, as it is a fascinating and gripping tale, and an invitation into a richer and deeper understanding of the nature of power, and of kingship, leadership, and the complex place of military power and might in Israel than our lectionary précis view affords. You see, David does not just step straight from defeating the giant to claiming the kingdom in the days following the deaths of Saul and Jonathan.

David is, at first welcomed into the court of Saul as a favourite, a young man and skilled warrior, whose master of the harp is one of the only things able to soothe the increasing unstable Saul.

But then rivalry develops; Saul becomes jealous, paranoid even about David. The repeated refrain of the crowds after a victory, who cry:
Saul has killed his thousands, but David his tens of thousands! must have rankled. David's close bond with Saul's son Jonathan, the deep love they have for each other, and the oaths they make to each other increased Saul's hostility. Saul tries to kill David at least twice, and his own son, Jonathan, at least once.

David flees Saul's court and lives, but as what? It is difficult to name, precisely. He does not return to hide as a humble shepherd, certainly. He takes to wild country, with a band of men – at times mercenaries, at times Guerrillas. Our terms don't exactly apply, but he fights, sometimes fighting Israel's enemies, sometimes fighting with Israel's enemies, pursued by Saul, who is now fighting the band of David, his rival for power, sometimes fighting the Philistines, desperately holding his kingdom together. David's band grows to at least 400 men; David, being David, attracts not a few women as well (often already married women, more than an isolated event for David) His powerfully charismatic character and thirst for power makes him a formidable rival to Saul, yet, although he has Saul in his power a number of times, David never raises his arm directly against Saul.

Saul continues to become increasingly unstable, trying desperately to keep and protect his kingdom, to pray to God – finding God silent, his kingdom falling apart. Finally, en extremis, he consults well, a witch is the usual translation, more precisely the women is a necromancer, she raises the dead, to enable people to talk to them for a while. At Saul's request, she raises the dead Samuel to speak with him. Samuel – a good prophet in the sense of foretelling the future - in life and in death – predicts Saul's death in battle the next day. So Saul goes forth, Jonathan with him, to their last battle. The battle is lost, Jonathan is taken and hanged, Saul dies, falling on his own sword rather than being taken by the enemy. Indeed, how he mighty are fallen.

So why pause at this text?

In part for its sheer beauty, worth slowing down for, for this alone. It is also the only personal lament that I know of in the bible. We have, especially through the psalms but also in Jeremiah and Lamentations, a number of laments – some about national situations, some about situations of personal distress, but this is the only one that I know of that is quite specifically a lament by one individual about a death of others. It is an important reminder of the power of grief and loss; important in its giving of permission to grieve deeply and personally about our losses of those great to us, great in our lives, greatly loved and missed.

But then, what is to be gained by taking this broader picture? The picture of David, the great boy warrior, great king, is less pretty, certainly, less idealistic and murkier. With this broader picture comes a sharp appreciation that David was deeply human, deeply flawed in his ruthlessness, in his drive for power. It makes the lament more eloquent, noble to me, knowing the deep ambiguity of the relationship that lies behind it, it points to the greatness undoubtedly present in David, that despite Saul's hounding him, and seeking his death, Despite Saul being his rival for power in the kingdom, he still acknowledges Saul's greatness, together with Jonathan's

I find a great mystery in the difference between Saul and David. Both were chosen by God, and anointed. Both were the unlikely choice, both were flawed characters, and great men. The mystery of the different unfolding of our lives is deep, unfathomable by us. Why, even as we all stand in this Christian community, under the grace of God, why do we have such different lives, different outcomes to our endeavours? That does not have a simple answer that is satisfactory – many simple answers are given in the context of David and Saul, as in our lives, but to me do not work – for example, it is often said that Saul sinned, been disobedient, and so was rejected by God. It's a simple answer, but deeply inadequate, as David is far from a sinless being, and as disobedient as Saul.

However, one thing to me rings clear through this story: that it is this world, our world, a very real and at times painful world that God has chosen to engage with enduringly. With our biblical texts from a time so long ago, together with our at times very partial grappling with them we can form simplistic views of the leadership, society and religion of ancient times, to see them as ideal examples, one way or another and so either bewail leadership and society of our own times as inadequate, deeply flawed, nowhere near the standards of great leadership of the past; or see, particularly in Old Testament texts, an example of the people of Israel and its leadership as the failures, useful mostly as an example of how not to be, examples

showing how good we are, or the New Testament pattern is. Neither of these views, I believe, is true. There is greatness and goodness in David, in Saul, in Jonathan, in the Israel of the past; there is weakness, sinfulness in all of them. They are, as we are, human, limited but with the possibility of goodness, even greatness. With all the possibilities, gifts, with all the flaws they and we carry, it is with us, with people in their societies, that God has chosen to relate, to interact. It is with us and for us that God chose to live – not some idealized world, not when conditions were perfect, when the perfect leaders and people came into being, but with us, with people like us, for us and for our salvation.
