

2 Samuel 18:5-15
Psalm 34
John 6:35, 41-51

Between heaven and earth

Most of you here this morning probably have in your pocket or bag a device which is capable of recording and storing thousands of photographs and tens of thousands of books.

These days, information is cheap – recording the details of our lives is cheap, and easy. We can click a picture of every meal we eat and upload it to share for others (for reasons not entirely clear), or write posts on all sorts of platforms, sharing instantly and perhaps forever what thought has just arced from one place to another in our minds.

We know that it wasn't like this in the "olden days", of course. But what is less obvious is what this meant for recording information back then. In the times that the Scriptures were written, materials were expensive, and the labour required to transmit a written story was enormous.

One effect of this was that you would keep the details down to just what needed to be said. While we – at a whim – can afford to store high resolution images and detailed texts we might never look at or read – the writers of what are now our Scriptures had to be sure that what was recorded actually mattered.

This being the case, what do we make of all the detail we have about the life of David in the scriptural narrative – for the detail abounds?

Today's reading from 2 Samuel skips over a lot of the Absalom affair, precisely to be brief. But, to fill in some of that detail: Absalom's sister Tamar was raped by their half-brother Amnon. Knowing this, David nevertheless refused to act against Amnon. Eventually, Absalom kills Amnon and flees into exile, later to be reconciled to David. Absalom, however, has high political ambitions, and campaigns to replace David as king, forcing David to flee Jerusalem. Absalom pursues David but, despite David's insistence that he not be hurt, the young man is killed, as we heard in today's reading. In the midst of all this, there are defections and spies, passion and suicide – all the makings of a great TV series.

Whatever judgement we might make about all that, we might wonder, Why even tell the story? Why do we need to know the "days of our lives" of these 10th Century (BC) Israelites? Of course, we can moralise happily about this or that event in the story. But if that was the intention of the writers themselves, then perhaps they might have given us a bit more of their own moralising because there isn't very much of that in the text. Mostly, we hear what happened but not what it means or what judgement we should make of it.

Why, when it was so difficult to record and reproduce this information, risk leaving it to readers to work out the moral of the story for themselves?

The reason for the detail has to do with the very humanity of the story. We might imagine those early editors looking at all the material they have in front of them, ranging from the innocence of David as a young shepherd and his courage in fronting up to Goliath, to his abuse of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah and his loss of strength

and sense in the face of Absalom – looking at all this and simply wondering how it could all be so. How could God’s favourite be all this?

And so they write it all down, or enough of it to make the point. Here is the breadth and length, the height and depth, of the life of any one of us. Even though the story has comparatively little detail compared to what we might tell about ourselves today, in a context where recording and storing information was so expensive the story displays an extraordinary interest in the details of human relationships and the impact of those details upon those people themselves. That David is the king makes the story all the more compelling because, as we have noted before, David serves here not simply as one person among the many billions of us who have lived before and since but as a representative figure.

When we come then to speak of God’s dealings with us, we must remember that it is with this kind of humanity that God engages. We are brave and beautiful, we kill and steal, we plant and build, we are neglected and raped. We are no mere “stars” which descend from heaven for a time before returning, as is sometimes sentimentally said, as if our core reality were the simplicity of a single light. We are – each of us – whole galaxies of hopes, experiences, achievements and failures.

Yet, for the most part, we prefer either to oversimplify the complexity of the good and the bad which we are. Such oversimplification is akin to the sentimentality we considered last week. It speaks a partial truth: “stop the boats”, “a woman’s right to choose”, “from the river to the sea”, “God gave us this land”, “but Absalom is my son” are partial truths, wishful oversimplifications of deep and complex human realities. Sentimentality omits inconvenient details about what we are.

But even if oversimplification serves us nicely in distracting us from unpleasant details of our reality, this doesn’t work for God. God will consider us without reduction, without covering over. There are no fig leaves adequate for shielding us from the God who already knows what we look like uncovered.

This is not necessarily good news. We oversimplify and distract ourselves and others from the details of our personal and collective humanity for good reason: we would rather others did not know, often enough even that we ourselves did not know. We don’t want this, not here, not now. The complex mess which we are – now right, now wrong, now strong, now weak, now sure, now unsure – makes the world more than we can bear. We simplify to survive.

But we are not in this way brought to heaven. And the result is that we cease to be either properly of the world or of heaven. Rather, like the unfortunate Absalom hanging in the fork of a tree, we are strangely suspended: hanging between heaven and earth. This is where we live most of our lives.

And so anything worth hearing of God and gospel must acknowledge this. The Old Testament narratives don’t just tell us “what happened”. They show David – and everyone else – now ascending a little, now descending a little, neither properly divine nor properly human. For whatever other reasons we might value the Old Testament, we have to love its realism.

And it’s because of this that the place Jesus himself occupies is our actual place: hanging on the cross, suspended between heaven and earth, seeming to be neither human nor divine. God know us here, as we are.

To say with John that the Word became flesh is to say God becomes our flesh in all its messy, suspended detail. And now the detail which matters most about us is that we are known better than we know ourselves. The detail which matters most is God’s very

knowledge of us, and its purpose: that we be loved as we are, caught between what we wish we were and what we see ourselves to be.

The details of the stories – David’s and ours – matter first because they are what make us us. This is us. But the details also matter because they are known by a God who – sometimes in spite of the details, sometimes because of them – loves us and cherishes us: for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.

This is not a simple God for a simple people. God is complex and variable because we are. And God is this, in order that we might simply be his. The scriptural writers invest so much in the detail of David’s life because it is the life of one of us, as we are; and it is a remarkable thing that such a one as he does not simply fall within God’s capacity to love, but is in fact the focus of that love.

And so also for us. This is a love which shines in our darkness and yet is not overcome by it.

For such an all-searching, all-comprehending and all-embracing love, all thanks be to God.

And let our thanksgiving take the form of turning to the messy, suspended world, and loving it as God does.
