

David's grief

One feature of a funeral which is always problematic is what is called the eulogy – when someone gives a tribute to the deceased. The problem is, how honest should we be? I have been at funerals where people have struggled to recognise the person being described and have viewed the proceedings as a blatant exercise in spin and distortion. Yet, on the other hand, is someone's funeral the time to air old grievances, to settle scores and to argue the case for their prosecution?

David's song of lament over King Saul raises all these questions, as there are all kinds of under-currents swirling around in the words that David speaks. To give some background, King Saul was Israel's first king and was a deeply flawed character, at times mentally unstable. He was from the north and had never really united the nation of Israel, much of which was enamoured with a young man called David. David had slain the Philistine champion Goliath who was threatening Israel and in so doing had endeared himself to the Israelites, not least those in the south of the country, Judah, where David was from. 'Saul has slain his thousands, but David his ten thousands' was the slogan that became popular in Israel, dividing the nation and undermining Saul. Not surprisingly, Saul had become insanely jealous of David, frequently attempting to kill him. So David and Saul's relationship was complex and conflicted, made more so by the deep and passionate friendship between David and Saul's son Jonathan. Here was a battleground for loyalties as Jonathan's affection for his father and his responsibilities to him were stretched and tested by his abiding love for his friend, Saul's enemy.

Now Saul and Jonathan lie dead, slain on the battlefield by the Philistines, and David is called upon to publicly lament over these two. How does he do this in an honest and a sensitive way?

Well, what I want to do here for a few moments is to consider David's lament for Saul and Jonathan, for we find here some classic features of the bereavement process, of what happens to us when we lose someone near and dear. To begin with there is often denial. If we had read the whole of this chapter from Samuel we would have found that a

messenger comes to tell David of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and David's first response is disbelief: 'how do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan died?' asks David. Could this messenger be mistaken? Are Saul and Jonathan really dead? There is, however, no mistake, no denying it. In fact it was this messenger who administered the decisive blow when the gravely wounded Saul pleaded with him to finish him off. And when David hears that he has the messenger killed for he his angry at him for slaying the Lord's anointed, and anger is often another feature of the grieving process. We are angry that our loved one is taken from us and sometimes others have to bear the brunt of it.

But what are we to make of the overall tone of this lament of David's? David comes across as deeply saddened and profoundly respectful of Saul - his enemy. He speaks of Saul glowingly as 'the glory of Israel', this flawed man who sought to murder him in moments of frenzied jealousy. 'How are the mighty fallen!' David repeats sorrowfully. He speaks of Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely and undivided in life and in death – when in fact they were deeply at odds over David. Is this all just propaganda – fake truth? Is it just an attempt to reconcile north and south and unite the nation?

Well, three brief points need to be made about David's tribute, three things which we can learn from when it comes to letting go of our loved ones. Firstly, death brings perspective. Often in life we are too immersed in relationships, too close up to view the other objectively. The parting of death brings an opportunity to see things more clearly, more fully, and David's loving and respectful tribute might be understood as the product of perspective. Secondly, death provides an opportunity for forgiveness. Again, in life, in the midst of sometimes turbulent relationships, forgiveness can be hard. But if death brings perspective there also comes the possibility of forgiveness which is much harder when we are swept along in the currents of a relationship. Forgiveness is easily spoken of but far harder to enact – sometimes it takes time and distance. And lastly, perhaps most importantly, the fact of death brings with it the hope of redemption – and maybe this is key to interpreting David's lament. You see, as Christians we believe that the story of a person's life here in this world is never complete. God is not finished with us in this life. There is always more to come. And so there is always the hope of redemption:

always the hope of beauty being crafted out of what was ugly in us, the hope of truth being crafted out of what was false in us, the hope of mending being wrought out of what was broken and disfigured in us. Let's say that David's tribute was a case of setting Saul and Jonathan's lives in the key of redemption. It's a case of seeing their lives through the eyes of one who brings life to the dead and who makes all things new – one who is able even to go back and to rewrite and to redeem the past.

This lament contains all the ambiguities, all the contradictions, all the loose ends that strew our relationships with those close to us. And death is an enemy which is defeated, but whose sting is still felt. But perhaps death can also be a friend. In death we gain perspective, we find the space for forgiveness, and we find the hope of redemption of all that was painful. Amen.

Living God,
our Maker, our Lover,
the one in whom our lives rest,
The one in all things are made new,
the one in whom we whose arms we are loved,
and blessed, and graced,
we praise and worship you.
You are the one who dwells
in unapproachable light, and holiness,
but who comes to dwell with us in Jesus of Nazareth.
In him you have taken our flesh and blood,
and you live in us by your eternal Spirit.
You come into our brokenness
into the mess and conflict of our worlds,
our joys and our deep regrets,
and your arms reach out to us
To mend and to heal
And to rewrite our disordered lives.
And here you meet us, in our gathering,
and in bread and wine.
O God we yield ourselves to you,
confessing what is wrong
as we yearn for your touch, for your embrace.
In Jesus Christ we are ransomed and healed,
restored and forgiven.
Grant that here we may feed on you,
and be nourished by your love,
and so live as your beloved children,
and so bring honour and glory to your name.
We pray these things in Jesus' name,
and in the word we pray together and saying...