

2 Samuel 11:1-17; 26-27

29.07.18

*David's sin*

Money, sex, and power: what is it about that unholy trinity that keeps it popping up in human history, again and again, soiling human affairs? It's been extraordinary this week carrying this passage of Scripture round in one part of my head with the constant drip-drip of 24/7 news in the other: from two directions I've had a story of a powerful man, tangled up in sexual scandal and failing attempts at cover-up – I'll let you join up the dots, but don't let anyone dare say that the Bible is not relevant and contemporary. In recent weeks we have been following the story of David's rise to the monarchy and our story today marks a turning-point, a hinge where everything changes. After this, things go downhill for David. And what I want to begin this morning by looking at each of the characters in the story, saying a little about them, and then I'll consider where we might locate ourselves in the narrative.

So we begin with David, and up until now, at least on the surface, his rise to power has been a story of success and blessing. He won over the hearts of the people by defeating the Philistine warrior Goliath, and he seized the city of Jerusalem and took it for his capital, and he brought the Ark of the Covenant which was the focus for God's presence to Jerusalem and there his dynasty, the 'house of David' was established for all time. It seems, indeed, that David is God's blue-eyed boy, or as it says of him one place, 'a man after God's own heart.' I have tried, however, to read this story through a lens of suspicion because I believe that the Bible is too rich and multi-layered to be read simply at the surface level. It has been my contention that in this narrative we need to be on the lookout for propaganda and for blatant manipulation and legitimization of human power. And that is because we as human beings do not handle power well. And I would suggest therefore that David is not quite as he appears superficially in this narrative— there are darker forces at work in him, and for that reason what happens in today's story is no great surprise.

The passage begins by telling us that it is the spring of the year 'the time when kings go out to battle' – but David sends out his general and his

officer and stays behind in Jerusalem. And what an irony that the events that unfold take place ‘in the spring of the year’, when new life blossoms - when what follows will be the tragic irruption of death. And maybe David would have done better to have accompanied his soldiers to war. Last week we read of a time when David was at home and at ‘rest’ from his enemies and I was warning of the danger of being ‘at rest’ and the importance in the Christian life of a kind of holy restlessness. Well here David is at rest in his palace, far from battle, and indeed we read of him getting up from his couch in the late afternoon – a life of rest indeed. But there’s that saying that ‘the devil finds work for idle hands’ - as happens here. And so the sordid story unfolds. David sees Bathsheba bathing and we read in verse 4 that ‘David sent messengers to fetch her’, or literally to ‘take’ her. And the original Hebrew word used there for ‘taking’ Bathsheba is the same one that is used earlier in Israel’s story when the people ask for a king and God warns them about kings. And six times God uses that word ‘take’: God warns that kings will take your sons for war, and he will take your daughters and he will take the best of your fields and he will take your grain and your vineyards and he will take your slaves and he will take your flocks. He will take, take, take for that is what kings all too often do. And now this king David takes a daughter of Israel and violates her. And there follows this desperate account of cover up as David who is used to being in control flounders to control events and to hide his wrongdoing. There are limits even to the power of a king! And it all ends in murder.

Then there is Bathsheba and she is powerless in this passage, at the mercy of the of the whim of the king. We know little about her except that she is taken and she only speaks two words, those two sonic words, repeated by women throughout history, prompting either joy or despair: ‘I’m pregnant!’ And then she is side-lined for now in the drama as others play their parts.

But then, of course, there is Uriah, this Uriah, who David attempts to manipulate and manoeuvre into sleeping with his wife, thus covering the traces; this Uriah who ends up carrying his own death warrant. The irony is that he, a Hittite - not even an Israelite - is the only man of principle in the whole story. He is a person of discipline. He defies the twisted promptings of the King. He will not sleep with his wife while his comrades are out on the battlefield. He will not violate the ties of loyalty and camaraderie that bind

soldiers together, instilling in them a code of conduct. He remains loyal and faithful to his fellows soldiers. What a contrast to Joab who under the king's orders will cut those ties by sending one of his own men to his death. And thus Uriah becomes a casualty of events that he has had no part in.

So David, Bathsheba, Uriah – these are the main characters in the story. But to return to where we started, there is another trinity of other 'characters' at work here, and their names are money, sex and power. And they are all instrumental in the events that unfold. Money – we heard last week of how David is at rest in his luxurious palace of expensive cedar wood imported from far away; and then sex – as David rises from his couch and feasts his eyes upon the figure of another man's wife; and then power – power that is legitimated, apparently, by divine decree and which David misuses to his own selfish ends. Money, sex and power – like a three headed monster these combine to shape the course of this narrative, and they just as surely shape our world today. So it seems today that we are condemned to be ruled by money, the power of mammon, which lives by endless production and consumption and which ravages nature and human life in its endless quest for profit. And such a world is highly sexualized as sex is used in the service of mammon to sell, sell, sell. And the result is a world configured by power and shaped by powerful elites and which breeds anger and resentment among those who are left disempowered. And it's no surprise that three seminal thinkers of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century were Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, who exposed the deep workings of this deadly threesome: Marx in his analysis of mammon and economics; Freud in his probings into eros and sexuality; and Nietzsche with his disclosure of the dynamics of power. Here the deep workings of the world were coming to light. But of course the church has always known it. So from early times Christians felt called to a life of poverty, and chastity and obedience, for they recognized that if Jesus was Lord then every other false lord, including this unholy trinity of money, sex and power must be dethroned.

So what do we learn from all this? Well, we learn a great deal about sin for a start. Our modern, progressive, secular world of course disdains the language of sin, but in fact we need urgently to learn about it and the church has much to teach the world. We learn for a start that sin is not just about doing bad things and making wrong choices. We learn rather that sin is a deep

power at work in the world, a force which exercises dominion over human beings and human affairs and which influences our politics and leaves us far less in control of our world than we think we are. So David may have been a sinful man with sinful passions and inclinations but greater forces were at work in him. That combination of money, sex and power combined to leave him vulnerable and less in charge than he thought he was as King of Israel, God's chosen. And our 21<sup>st</sup> century world needs to understand that we are not as autonomous and in charge as we might like to think.

But of course the story tells us too about the destructive nature of sin, the way it spreads like a cancer. It seems to have a momentum. How is it that a lustful look at a woman bathing begins a chain of events that end in murder? And along the way there is deception and manipulation and intrigue and a total breakdown of trust and loyalty. Here is the power of sin to generate and to proliferate and to cause destruction. It's a force for death and it can have a frightening and devastating power. It's an old, familiar story, of how one powerful person's foolishness, one person's vanity, one person's self-preoccupation can lead to such dire consequences – and you can pick your examples today.

And of course all this throws into relief what it means to confess Jesus as Lord and to live that way. This is not just some private, personal, consumer-choice. The confession that Jesus is lord cuts to the very heart of the way the world is ordered and constituted. And Christian communities who choose to live lives of poverty, chastity and obedience offer a profound challenge to disorder and to the power of death and that is what being a Christian is all about. But what about us?

Well, in conclusion, I want to return briefly to Uriah. For even though he is a Hittite and not an Israelite, he is in a sense a Christ figure. After all, by following the path of faithfulness and right he ends up dying. And in dying he saves David's reputation and he also saves Bathsheba, for the penalty for adultery, of which she would of course have been accused, would have been her death. Uriah is a Saviour in this story. But if Uriah is a Christ figure he is also in his own way he is a model for Christian discipleship and this is where I want to locate us in this narrative. Here, in Uriah, is a man whose life is motivated by higher loyalties, a person of integrity, discipline and fidelity who does what is right whatever the cost. And that is about as good a

description as you'll get of a disciple of Jesus Christ. And it's a word to all of us who take Christ's name. Amen.