

2 Samuel 12:1-9, 13-15

05.08.18

This is about me

‘You are the man!’ I guess we could think of occasions when that phrase would signal a moment to savour and to celebrate: maybe if we have just won a lottery or been given promotion or been elected president: ‘you are the man!’ Wow! For David, however, that phrase spells anything but good news. It is a moment of accusation and one of profound undoing for him. Last week we heard about David’s shameful sin: his adultery with Bathsheba and his attempts to cover it up which ended with the calculated murder of Bathsheba’s husband Uriah. And we might wonder how David has been living with his sin. Had he rationalised it, somehow justified it as we so easily do with wrong-doing, convinced himself that maybe it wasn’t so serious after all? I imagine David found ways to excuse what he had done. And all those rationalisations and excuses need somehow to be confronted and subverted and destroyed if David is to live truthfully and authentically.

So alone comes Nathan, the prophet. We have met him before when David was considering building a temple for God. Then Nathan played the game that religion all too often plays with the powers that be. He told David exactly what he wanted to hear and that he had God’s blessing to do exactly as he planned. Until God intervened and said otherwise. Now, in this story, Nathan has grown a bit of prophetic backbone and challenges David with what he has done – and the effect is devastating.

So how does he do it? Well, he comes to David and he tells this story. In a certain city there were two men, one rich and one poor and the poor man had a lamb – a lamb that he loved and brought up and nurtured tenderly. And of course Nathan is talking here to an ex-shepherd so David is drawn into the story. But the rich man, who has plenty of sheep, steals this lamb to feed a stranger. What does David make of that? Well, he is outraged! ‘Such a man deserves to die!’ And then boom! Those devastating words; ‘you are the man!’ And David’s defences are breached, his rationalisations demolished and he is undone. ‘This is about me!’ And there follows penitence and judgement.

Nathan, of course, could have handled this differently. He could have angrily confronted David with his sin and denounced him with righteous indignation – and demanded repentance! And David would have been thrown back on the defensive and would have probably dismissed Nathan, possibly had him punished for insubordination. But Nathan knows that there is a way into David's heart, an indirect way, through a story that has the power to penetrate David's shield. And the effect is like a sword piercing David's soul: 'this is about me!'

You see the way into a person's heart is not always to say things directly. Why do you think Jesus so often told stories, parables, that sometimes left people baffled and confused? Why not just come out and say it, tell it as it is? Why clothe the message with trappings that seem to obscure it? Well, of course, it's because the truth of the Gospel is not just information to be imparted. The Gospel cannot be written up on Wikipedia. As one contemporary poet has put it, 'Whatever Jesus of Nazareth's death means, it doesn't mean something that can be written on a fridge magnet.' The truth of the Gospel requires that piercing moment when our world collapses and we exclaim, 'this is about me!' And story and symbol have that power, to reach us at that deeper level. And of course that's why Jesus left is not with a handbook but with a meal, a meal freighted with symbolism and meaning that cannot adequately be distilled into words. Here at this table we handle mystery as the Gospel is performed and food is shared and we eat and drink, and so God's grace becomes embodied in us and then it is taken out and performed in the world.

It brings to my mind a memory of when I was at school, a teenager – quite a long time long ago – and I and one of my close friends had been prepared for confirmation, when you are confirmed in the faith in which you were baptised as a baby. And we had gone through a series of classes and they been pretty dull, to tell you the truth and we'd been pretty bored. And as is the tradition – a tradition I disagree with and which we do not practice here – confirmation was the rite by which you became eligible to partake of Holy Communion. And so the confirmation service took place, ending with us taking our first Holy Communion. And I was sitting next to my friend Nick and bear in mind that we were sixteen year olds, that rather difficult teenage stage, where you can be a bit awkward and a bit emotionally blocked. And I

remember as the bread and wine came to us I suddenly heard my friend Nick sniffing – he was crying. Beyond the classes, beyond the words, beyond the attempts to explain, beyond the futile efforts to convey that we were sinners in need of grace, the act of holy Communion got through to us and reached us. ‘This is about me!’

So also with us here this morning. Christ comes to us in bread and wine, in symbol and in story. ‘This is my body’. And like David of old we hear those same words spoken by Nathan the prophet, ‘you are the man!’ ‘You are the woman!’ You are the child!’ Except that unlike with David these are no words of reproach, words of judgement. They are words of inexpressible grace, and we testify in our hearts, ‘this is about me!’ Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
Eternal Maker and creator of all things,
we praise you the mysterious one,
we worship you the elusive God,
forever beyond and out of our reach,
forever hidden from our sight.
We lift up our hearts and praise your holy name.
And we praise you that you, the hidden one,
have revealed yourself to us;
disclosing yourself in the things that you have done,
in the glory of your creation and your great acts,
and in the stories told and handed down by your people.
And above all you have revealed yourself
in Jesus of Nazareth, God with us.
Living God, in him you have come and shown us
that we are loved;
in him you have shown that you are for us;
in him you have proclaimed your grace and forgiveness.
And so we confess to you our sin and our failure;
we acknowledge the ways we have strayed
and allowed ourselves to be tempted,
the harm we have done to ourselves and to others.
Speak words of grace to us once more.
Assure us that your love is stronger than ours
and that we are held fast in your embrace.
Come now living God in our worship and our praise
and in bread and wine
and draw us close.
For we pray these things in Jess name and in his words
we pray together saying...