

City of David - 2 Samuel 5-6

Date: 14 April 2024, 2nd Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Everlasting Kingdom - 2 Samuel

Texts: 2 Samuel 5-6; cf Exodus 25:12-14, Number 4.15, 18-20

The strange world of the Bible

There's moments when we read the Bible when it seems very strange. Sometimes we read a text and it feels very contemporary. But other times what we read feels very foreign, from a very different time and place, which of course it is. Not only is the text sometimes strange, but it also can confront and disturb us. This is more common with the Old Testament. Often we simply ignore it as too strange, too hard. Or we pit the Old Testament against the New, saying that we don't like the God of the Old Testament because he's angry and violent, we much prefer the peaceful and loving Jesus thank you very much. But the Old Testament is the Bible that Jesus read. And the God of the Old Testament is the God he called his Father. We cannot understand Jesus without the Old Testament. If we want Jesus, we have to take the Old Testament as well. 2 Samuel 6 is one of those strange and disturbing texts. But it is worth us taking the time to sit and wrestle with it. We'll see it teaches us about who God is and how we should worship him.

We're covering chapters 5 and 6 today, and with these chapters we come almost to the high point of the whole story of Samuel. That is next week in 2 Samuel 7, where God promises David that one of his descendants will reign forever. Since way back in 1 Samuel 16 where Samuel anointed the teenage David we've been waiting for him to become king. Last week we saw the way finally cleared for David, and today, the moment has finally come. Chapter 5 races through the action. All Israel comes together to make David king. Next David conquers Jerusalem and makes it his capital. He builds a palace and builds a harem. It's typical behaviour for an ancient Near Eastern monarch, but it's explicitly against God's command in Deuteronomy 17 that the king must not take many wives. Then he defeats the Philistines, Israel's arch enemies. He acknowledges his victory has been with God's help,

He said, 'As waters break out, the LORD has broken out against my enemies before me.' So that place was called Baal Perazim. [which means *the lord who breaks out*] **21** The Philistines abandoned their idols there, and David and his men carried them off.

With these words we recall way back in chapter 4 where Israel was defeated by the Philistines and the Ark of the covenant was captured. Now the reverse has happened. God's promises are coming true. What will become the key elements of Israel's faith - King and City are in place. What is next? What do you do if you're an Ancient Near Eastern king who has defeated

your enemies and established a new royal capital? We have inscriptions of the Assyrian kings like Ashurnasirpal II in the 9th century, Sargon II in the 8th and Sennacherib in the 7th inviting their gods into the city and holding a feast for the people. That brings us to chapter 6 as the narrative slows down. We'll look at 2 points - the Ark and David and Michal.

The Ark - 6.1-15

David now does just what these Assyrian kings did. He brings the Ark of the LORD to Jerusalem and holds a feast for the people. At this point we pick up one of the narrative threads that has been lying in the background since 1 Samuel 7 even before Saul. It's worth pausing for a refresher on what the Ark of the Covenant was. We see it there in verse 2,

[David] and all his men went to Baalah [that is Kiriath Jearim] in Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark.

The Ark is the gold covered box which God instructed Moses to build. In it was placed the stone tablets inscribed with the 10 commandments that God gave to Moses on Mt Sinai. The Ark was placed in the holy of holies at the centre of the Tabernacle. It was the seat of God's throne, the site of God's presence on earth.

So David puts the Ark on a new cart, and starts off on the way to Jerusalem. 2 priests go with it, Ahio in front, Uzzah behind. And *David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD*. But then disaster strikes. The oxen stumble and Uzzah reaches out his hand to stop the ark falling off the back of the cart. We read in verse 7.

The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God.

Woah! Hold on a second. What is going on here? Why did God strike Uzzah down? Wasn't he doing the right thing? How is this ok on God's part? Surely this is one of those Old Testament moments where God is angry and capricious? Lest we think that this is purely a modern objection, David himself has a similar response - of anger and fear.

8 Then David was angry because the LORD's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah. **9** David was afraid of the LORD that day and said, 'How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?'

This is a very confronting moment. I want to suggest that if we take a breath, slow down and look at the context of Samuel and the background of the Law we will get a better understanding of what's going on even if we remain unsettled. One or two of you may recall the earlier episode with the ark back in 1 Samuel chapter 4-6. Our sermon then was called 'Putting God in a Box', because that's exactly what both Israel and the Philistines try to do.

There Israel presumed that just by having the ark God would be on their side and they would win. Instead they are trounced by the Philistines who take the ark. But then God's hand is heavy on the Philistines and so they send the ark back to Israel, and here's the important bit, *in a cart*.

We've already seen that David has been doing just the same sort of thing that the kings of surrounding nations do. Now he's doing the same thing that the Philistines did to move the ark. And actually this is a huge problem. You see back in Exodus 25 the ark was built with two poles, one on either side, for the priests to carry it. In Numbers we read that the Kohathite clan who are assigned to carry the ark by the poles, "but they must not touch the holy things or they will die."¹ In fact the whole reason that the ark was in Kiriath Jearim was because, when the ark had been returned to Israel, the men of Beth Shemesh looked inside it and 70 of them were struck dead. In response they had pleaded that the ark be held somewhere else saying, "Who can stand in the presence of this holy God?" It's the same question David asks, "How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?"

This background helps explain what is going on here, but the question still remains of what we are to do with the holiness of God. What is God's holiness? We often think of God's moral perfection, and that is true. God is light. In him there is no darkness. His eyes are too pure to look on sin. But God's holiness is also his transcendent life and power. He is the source of all things. A helpful analogy is the sun. All life on earth depends upon the light and warmth of the sun. It's good. But get too close and you will be burned up. Similarly, God is the source of life. His holy presence brings blessing. Were he to withdraw his presence we would die. But for us as impure creatures to get too close to God we would be burned up, not in spite of, but precisely because he is so good. So for example, when Peter first meets Jesus and sees his power and goodness, he says, "Go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man!"²

In our contemporary society there are very few moments where we have a sense of the holy, that there are some things that can only and must be approached with reverence and caution. We love the idea that God is love. We think we can casually approach him. Like Israel, we put him in a box, and can think he's there just to meet our desires, to fit our agendas. David took it for granted that God was on his side. God had broken out against the Philistines. Now God has broken out against Uzzah. He presumed to touch the ark. David is angry that God has halted his plans, but in truth he is the one who brought this upon Uzzah because he didn't follow what God had said about how to approach him, and instead copied

¹ Exodus 25:12-14, Numbers 4.15, 18-20

² Luke 5.8

the surrounding nations. He too has to learn the lesson Israel did. This is a warning for us not to approach God casually, on our terms, like the surrounding culture. Instead, we are to come to him on his terms, as he teaches us in his Word the Bible.

“How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?” David asks. I love how this text hints at the answer to David’s question. First, the ark stays for the next 3 months in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. And because the ark is there, the LORD blesses Obed-Edom and his household and everything he has. The Holy God desires to bless us, if only we would open our homes and our hearts to him. Second, Obed-Edom is a foreigner. He’s a Gittite, which means he in fact is from Gath. He’s a Philistine! Here is a picture of the blessing that God wants to bring - it’s for all peoples and nations, even for Israel’s enemies, even for us who were God’s enemies, if we will come on God’s terms. Third, David does end up moving the ark, and this time with the priests carrying it. But did you notice that he does so only with the sacrifice of a bull and a fattened calf. It’s just a tiny little picture of what we see God do in Christ.

How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me? Who can stand in the presence of this holy God? In Jesus, the true ark of God has come. He is the place where the Holy God is present. When people who were unclean reached out to touch him, his holiness did not mean they were destroyed, but rather his holiness went out and made them clean. Think of the woman in Mark 5 who had been bleeding for 12 years. Her flow of blood had made her unclean, unable to approach God in worship, unable to receive human touch because she would make others unclean. But now reaching out to touch Jesus, the instant she touches him she is cleansed and healed. How? How does Jesus’ holy touch heal and not destroy morally and spiritually impure people like you and me? The answer is because he is also the sacrifice which cleans us from sin. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In the cross, the wrath of the holy God breaks out against all the sin of the world, but it’s against Jesus, not us. He is struck down, that we might live. So now his touch brings life and healing. Through him we come into the very presence of the Holy God. He pours out the Holy Spirit, God’s holy and life giving presence on all who come to him, so that we who were by rights strangers like Obed-Edom, receive his blessing.

Is that you? Do you have a sense of your own impurity and uncleanness, maybe because of what you’ve done, maybe because of what’s been done to you; And you don’t think you can come close to God? Come to Jesus. In his holy love he’s taken your sin and shame, so that you can receive his life and healing power, so that you can receive the blessing of his presence by the Holy Spirit. He will cleanse you and make you new.

What do you do when the Holy One comes to you, so that you can stand before him? The text tells us, celebration and worship. That bring us to point 2.

David and Michal - 12-23

So David went to bring up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. **13** When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. **14** Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, **15** while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets.

16 As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart.

It's a day of celebration and worship for the nation and for David. David blesses the people and gives them food. But amidst all the celebration the text zooms in on a moment of domestic conflict. Michal, Saul's daughter, sees David dancing before the LORD and she despises him. Verse 20.

When David returned home to bless his household, Michal, daughter of Saul, came out to meet him and said, 'How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!'

The last time we saw David and Michal together was back when she helped him escape from her father. Since then her father and brothers have been killed, David has gained a harem and the throne. Michal was given to another husband Paltiel, but David demanded she be returned to him, much to Paltiel's distress. Michal's words show, at least from her end, love has turned to bitterness. She is the daughter of a king, and now her errant husband is behaving like a bawdy lowlife. Her seething comments bristle with contempt and sexual jealousy.

David's response is just as sharp.

21 David said to Michal, 'It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD's people Israel – I will celebrate before the LORD. **22** I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honour.'

There is a word for us here, but before we come to that, I want to pause on the bitter taste this whole exchange gives to this day of celebration.

Contempt, resentment and jealousy are all signs that a marriage is in trouble. As a text from an ancient patriarchal society, and one centred on David's rise to the throne, this moment could be easily omitted from the text. But it's not. And we have sympathy for Michal. This is one of those many moments in the Bible, where we see what polygamy, powerful men taking many wives, does to family relationships and individuals. Marriage is made to be life long and exclusive. Infidelity wounds deeply. And we note the months and years apart put great strain on the marriage.

On the other hand, David's words to Michal are instructive to us. She is concerned with public appearance, how David's behaviour reflects on her, and in doing so misses what he is doing - worshipping God with all his might. David's words echo to us.

"I will celebrate before the LORD. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes."

To worship God is about God and for his eyes and his glory. How we appear before others is a distant consideration. I have to say that it is an easy tendency to despise others for how they worship because it makes us feel uncomfortable. I've often heard the contempt in people's voices when they write off those happy clappies at Pentecostal churches. In a similar vein people turn their nose up at "the beauty of holiness" so valued by the High Anglicans or Roman Catholics. To despise brothers and sisters for how they worship God has no place among us. We are called to love one another. At the same time, when we come to worship, you and I had better make sure that we come for God, and not for public performance or to be seen by others.

There's one final point - what does David do after he has worshipped God? He blesses the people. He feeds them. It's as though worship empowers him to bless others with what we have received from the Lord's table.

I love the structure of this text. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. God is holy. We cannot casually reach out our hand to touch him, not least because our sin makes us unclean. But in Christ, the Holy God has reached out to touch us, and his holy touch brings healing and life and forgiveness. And so as those who have been cleansed our hearts are full of joy. We have to worship and celebrate, that is what church is all about! We come for God, but we come together. Through worship we're empowered to bless others, to share of the goodness we have received from the LORD's hand.