

Amnon and Tamar - 2 Samuel 13

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Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Everlasting Kingdom - 2 Samuel

Texts: 2 Samuel 13

Listening to 2 Samuel 13 is difficult. If you're new to Christianity or just visiting St George's you may be wondering why on earth did we read this text today? How could this be in the Bible?

We've been working our way through the books of Samuel that trace the story of Israel's first and second kings Saul and David. David has been the hero of the story, but in 2 Samuel 11 we saw his spectacular fall, seeing a woman, Bathsheba bathing, taking her for himself, then murdering her husband to cover up what he had done. Through the remaining chapters of Samuel we see the consequences of David's sin play out in his family and in the nation, starting with our text today.

One of the central themes of the Bible is that we as human beings are fallen. We have a tendency to mess things up. We're sinful. Call it what you like, we have a dark side. We don't love God or our neighbour, quite the contrary. We might try to sweep this under the carpet, but the Bible is prepared to look at this square in the face. And if we're honest, that is the world we live in.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1 in 5 women in Australia have experienced sexual violence (1 in 16 men), 85% of these were by someone known to the woman.¹ Worldwide 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence - mostly by an intimate partner.² Rosie Batty, former Australian of the year, writes, *"I want to tell everybody that family violence happens to everybody. No matter how nice your house is, how intelligent you are. It happens to anyone and everyone"*. I know that preaching on a text like this some of you will have experienced sexual violence.

One of the things about preaching through books of the Bible is that the text sets the agenda for what you preach on. Our text today is one of the most confronting in the whole Bible, but that is because what it narrates, Amnon raping his sister and then Absalom murdering him, is something we'd rather not see. But we need to hear this text for the sake of those who have been abused, so that we might hear their story, and for the sake of our communities, so that they might be places of safety.

One of the most helpful things I've read on this chapter is an article by evangelist Glen Scrivener, "When it comes to abuse, it takes a village."³ It was written in the wake several high profile stories of Christian organisations covering up sexual abuse. I'm going to follow his lead and look

¹ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/sexual-violence/latest-release>

² https://www.commongrace.org.au/16_days_of_prayer_details

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/abuse-takes-village/>

at how each of the actors play a part to maintain a corrupt system, to facilitate this evil, silence the victim and cover it up. It's thousands of years old, but the insights of this text are ones that we are only fully realising in our culture today.

Amnon. Let's start with Amnon. He's David's firstborn son, the messianic heir to the kingdom. His name means "faithful", named after one of God's key attributes. He's meant to be constant in his love. We're introduced to him as a hopeless romantic. "In the course of time, Amnon son of David fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom son of David." But his "love" becomes an obsession. "Amnon became so obsessed with his sister Tamar that he made himself ill. She was a virgin, and it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her." It's the mindset of a stalker, fixated and frustrated. Notice he doesn't want to do something *with* Tamar, this is no sense of love as mutual affection. He only wants to do something *to* her. She's not a person, just the object of his fantasy.

We may remember the 7th commandment, "you shall not commit adultery", but the law of Moses also outlines other strict prohibitions on incest.⁴ What's more the penalty for rape is death.⁵ Amnon is giving reign to sexual fantasies that violate the strongest taboos. Tamar should be absolutely off limits. Indeed it is the prospect of transgressing these boundaries that he finds so arousing, not to mention taking her virginity.

And when it comes to the point, that is what he does. The text boils it down to the simple, awful, horror: "he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her." There is a power dynamic here, but the rape is not primarily about power. Rather it's his power that enables him to force himself on her to satisfy his unbridled desire. David saw a beautiful woman. He wanted her. He took her. Amnon is just doing what he has seen his Dad model, no matter that the woman in question is his sister.

As I was writing this sermon several articles came on my newsfeed citing a recent study saying that there has been a dramatic rise in the number of young people experiencing sexual assault. The Federal Health Minister has laid the blame on pornography and social media normalising the transgression of boundaries.⁶ Yes, absolutely these are a massive problem. Sex sells. And we want sex and we want money. They are the two sacred cows of our culture. And they are destroying people's lives, both the abused, and the abusers. One of the things I would love to see the church be is a place where we learn what healthy sex and relationships look like, as we hear God's life giving word, and as we encourage each other in life sustaining habits. For us as

⁴ Leviticus 18.6-23

⁵ Deuteronomy 22.25-27

⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-23/teen-sexual-assault-mental-health-problems/103873228>
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-23/plibersek-sexual-violence-young-people-social-media/103884304>

parents, it's about having those conversations with our kids, and working on good digital habits, like internet filters and holding off on smart phones and social media.

Once Amnon has done to Tamar what he wanted, lust turns to intense hate. "In fact he hated her more than he had loved her." He throws her out, literally saying to his servant, "Get this thing out of my sight", and bolting the door against her like she was some kind of animal. One commentator says that his hatred is because he realises the possible consequences of what he has done and so blames her for her "charms".⁷ I think it's more a case of the revulsion he feels at himself for violating his sister he projects on to her.

As 21st century readers we wonder how can Tamar say, "Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me"? But in a patriarchal culture where marriage was the only form of social security, for her to be cast out meant a lifetime of social and economic devastation.

But Amnon could not have done what he did had it not been for other members of this dysfunctional kingdom

Jonadab. Next we turn to Jonadab the wise. He's Amnon's cousin, David's nephew. He's described as very shrewd. It's the same word used to describe the snake in the garden, "more crafty than any of the wild animals God had made." And he slithers up to advise Amnon to grasp at something forbidden. His name too is a betrayal. Jonadab means "The LORD gives". God may give, but Jonadab hatches a plan for the king's son to *take* what he wants, what he should not. He will take like our first parents in the garden. He will take like his father did Bathsheba. Just like in the garden, sin spirals out. The advice of Amnon will lead to the desecration of Tamar, the murder of Amnon, the eventual rebellion and then death of Absalom, the inconsolable grief of David, a civil war, a kingdom torn by bloodshed.

Tamar. At the centre of this story is Tamar. Her name means "palm tree". She's tall, upright, fruitful. She's the only one with any kind of virtue and it's turned against her. She's a skillful cook and caring sister. There's a mounting dread as she prepares the special heart shaped dumplings. She does everything in her power to resist Amnon's advances. No should have been enough. No should always be enough. She appeals to his sense of right and wrong. She appeals to his care for her. She appeals to his self image. She tries to buy time, asking him to speak with their father. But Amnon has no real concern for her. He takes her then throws her out.

⁷ Robert Alter, *The David Story*, Norton: 269

She stumbles out wailing in grief. Her life is in ruins. She tears her beautiful robe in mourning. It's an image of the tear in the fabric of the kingdom, like king Saul's robe had been torn. It's an echo of Joseph's bloodstained robe. That was another episode of sibling sin and sexual transgression. But where Joseph could break free and flee from Potiphar's wife, Tamar cannot escape Amnon. The scene ends with her desolate in her brother's house.

Absalom. Enter Tamar's full brother, Absalom. His name means "Father of peace", but his actions are a parody of God's *shalom*. He sees his distraught sister and says, "Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you?" It sounds like tender words. But how does he know straight away that it's Amnon? And doesn't this minimise what Amnon has done? Then he hushes her up. "Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart." It's what all the men in this story do, play the family card to minimise and manipulate and keep the peace when it's a false peace. Silencing the victim is so often what happens, maybe especially when this happens in a family.

Rather than bringing this darkness to light, Absalom tries to manage the situation himself. He nurses his hatred for two whole years before exacting vengeance in murdering Amnon in cold blood. Ostensibly it's because of what Amnon did to Tamar, but with Amnon out of the way, Absalom is now first in line to the throne. And we wonder, is that why he didn't intervene before Amnon attacked Tamar?

David. Finally we come to David. He's Tamar's father. He's the king. His job is to uphold justice. To protect the vulnerable. Was he naive or willfully blind when he handed his daughter over to his son? In verse 21 we read, "When King David heard all this, he was furious." That is entirely right. He should be furious. But that's all. He says nothing. He does nothing. There's no comfort for his daughter. There's no reprimand for his son, let alone the punishment he should execute as king. As the consequences of his own sin devastate his own family, he is impotent. He has lost any sense of moral authority. For the good of the nation, for the good of his own daughter, he should hold his son to account. But he is passive in the face of evil. As the former chief of the Australian Army has said, "The standard you walk past is the standard you accept."

Us. It's so clear from this text that it's not just enough to identify the "bad apples" like Amnon. If we want to protect Tamars we've got to address the "village", the system that enables abuse. And we've got to take an honest look at our part in it, our own capacity to enable or to turn a blind eye, to "manage" or "cover up". Each of the characters in this story ask us hard questions.

Am I like Amnon?

Do I use my power to prey upon or to serve the weak?

Am I prepared to interrogate my own desires? To discipline them so I stick to the boundaries God has laid down, in order to foster cultures of safety?

Am I like Jonadab?

Do I excuse and enable through strategies and rationalisations for the greater good? Do I believe in someone's position or potential that I turn a blind eye to the rules? Is my loyalty to an important man doing important work, or to the vulnerable, to victims? Do I value the tribe more than the truth?

Am I like Absalom?

Do I try to manage the situation rather than bringing it out into the light? Do I minimise evils perpetrated for the sake of keeping the peace? Do I try to silence victims to not disrupt the status quo?

Am I like David? Indulgent, passive, angry, but doing nothing, neglecting my responsibility to act on behalf of victims? Or perhaps more pointedly, what kind of example am I setting for my kids? Am I not just teaching Biblical sexual ethics, but also modelling in word and deed respectful relationships? And especially us as Dads.

But what about Tamar?

Absalom tells Tamar to be quiet and to not take this to heart. So often this is the case for victims of sexual abuse that either they are silenced or they don't feel they are able to tell someone what has happened to them. And yet, by recording her story in the pages of Scripture, God has ensured that she is not silenced. Her story stands in God's word as a testimony for all who like her have suffered and been silenced. It stands so that we would hear and believe the cries of Tamar and her sisters. But even when we fail or when there is no one to hear, Tamar's story is heard because God is a God who hears the cries of his little ones. He is the same God who said to Moses from the burning bush, "I have seen the misery of my people ... I have heard them crying out ... I am concerned about their suffering, so I have come down to rescue them."⁸ This is the same God who meets us in the person of Jesus, and who is with us by the Holy Spirit.

This being Trinity Sunday, let me meditate for a moment on how the Triune God cares for his little ones. We have an everlasting Father, who unlike David is dependable and eternally faithful in his love and who acts for his children. Jesus is David's true son, who uses his power not to exploit, but to serve. He is the true king who has come to establish justice and righteousness, and who one day will come to judge all those who do such things. Unlike Absalom, he is the true prince of peace, who says "come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you

⁸ Exodus 3.7-8

rest.” And with us even right now is the Holy Spirit the Wonderful Counsellor, comes alongside to comfort. Unlike Jonadab, He speaks words of wisdom to protect, and words of compassion to heal.

In Jesus, God not only stands for Tamar, but also with Tamar, because he himself also suffered. He too was an innocent victim whose body was violated by wicked men. In his wounds we find healing. And in his resurrection we find the hope and the promise that evil will not have the last word. The Victim has become the Victor because he suffered with us and for us. In his church he is bringing in his kingdom, where “rulers serve, the powerful protect, the lowly are lifted, bodies are temples, sex is sacred, and victims are honoured.”⁹ That is what we are called to be. A place of sanctuary and healing. “When these truths are violated, when God’s children are violated—and when it occurs in Christ’s church, even in his name—there could not be a greater evil.”¹⁰ But we are a people who believe in a Christ who is stronger than the greatest evil. To believe is to have hope. Hope for the church, hope for ourselves, hope for people like Tamar.

If you have lived through this chapter it can be difficult to have such hope. And yet, if you have tasted something of the goodness, the gentleness, the love of Christ, dare to believe that small voice that says, “The Victim lives! He lives for me!” And my hope is that as you are here in the community of God’s people, as we live the way he calls us to, honouring people as made in the image of God, and bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, then you may find healing and hope and peace. In a world full of Amnons, it is David’s true Son Jesus that we need. In him we find healing and hope.

If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence call:

Emergencies: 000

1800 Respect National Helpline: 1800 737 732

SASS (Sexual Assault and Support Services): 1800 697 877

Women's Crisis Line: 1800 811 811

Men's Referral Service: 1300 766 491

Lifeline: 131 114

Excellent online resources can be found sass.org.au and saferresource.org.au
For more information about a service in your state or local area download the **DAISY App** in your smartphone’s App Store or Google Play.

⁹ Glen Scrivener, op. cit.

¹⁰ Glen Scrivener, *ibid*