

Absalom! Absalom!

Date: 9 June, 2024

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Everlasting Kingdom - 2 Samuel

A Sermon on 2 Samuel 18:19-19:8

This morning we conclude our two sermons in what I described last week as the most lavishly narrated sequence in the two books of Samuel: the account of Absalom's rebellion, extending from chapter 15 to chapter 20 of the book of 2 Samuel. Last Sunday we spent most of our time looking at the fateful moment when Absalom, having taken possession of Jerusalem, fatefully takes counsel from the wrong man.

Our passage last week ended with David's army taking advantage of the respite offered them by Hushai's duplicitous counsel to Absalom. Speedily, David and his men cross the river Jordan, before taking refuge in the city of Mahanaim. Absalom and his Israelite army follow in pursuit. David tells his men of his intention to lead them out in battle, but his soldiers tactfully ask him to remain behind in the city: we infer as readers that the wily, resourceful David who led daring raids on the Philistines in his youth, and the sensuous, idle King David, who neglected to superintend the troops in the Ammonite war of chapters ten to twelve, have now given way to an elderly King David, one no longer capable of leading his troops in person, a liability on the field of battle. The command passes to Joab, together with his brother Abishai and the Philistine mercenary, Ittai the Gittite. As his army leaves the city, David says to them in the hearing of all his men, 'Deal gently with the lad Absalom for my sake.'

In the ensuing battle David's army of professional soldiers and Philistine mercenaries overwhelms the conscripts of Absalom. Bizarrely to our ears, accustomed as we are to a deforested, dry Levant, the battle takes place in a thick wood. The usurper himself, in a scene to bring joy to the balding and bald, finds himself lifted from his mule and suspended in mid-air as his beautiful tresses of long hair become entangled in a dense network of spiky oak boughs.

One of David's soldiers rushes to tell Joab that he has seen Absalom hanging in the oak, but, remembering David's plea before the troops, resists pressure from Joab to strike down the usurper. Joab is therefore obliged to kill Absalom himself, which he does by plunging three arrows into the usurper's heart, as he hangs helplessly in the heart of the oak. By this point in the

narrative, we've already seen Joab summarily dispatch personal enemies in defiance of David's express wishes, and Joab, having gone to such lengths to secure Absalom's reconciliation with David after the death of Amnon, certainly would have had every right to be furious at having been made the unwitting abettor of a man who has now led Israel into a state of civil war. But a moment's reflection allows one to see how impossible it is that Absalom should remain alive after the failure of his rebellion. Joab is not here indulging in a private vendetta: if the state itself is to survive, Absalom must die. Joab does exactly what the situation requires. But how will David react to the news that his son is dead?

And this brings us to our passage for today. Ahimaaz, one of the two spies who succeeded in bringing David news of Ahithophel's plans back in chapter seventeen, now begs Joab for the honour of bringing back news to the king that the revolt has been quashed. Joab, as we've seen back in chapter eleven, knows that David has the bad habit of lashing out at the bearers of bad news, and he also knows that David's thoughts are no longer focussed upon the good of the kingdom, but on the safety of his eldest surviving son and favourite. Ahimaaz is too valuable a man to lose, so Joab sends an unnamed Cushite instead. But Ahimaaz wears Joab down, and then outruns the Cushite, travelling, not directly through the woods, but taking instead a more circuitous route through more open country.

A new scene begins with David waiting anxiously in the gate for news of the battle. A solitary runner betokens victory; bands of disorganised troops a rout. The narrator picks up on Joab's earlier use of the word **בשורה**, good news, news that will bring a reward to the messenger, and uses it to craft a scene full of suspense and irony. The watchman reports to David that he sees a solitary runner, and David says, 'If he is on his own, there is good news in his mouth.' We then watch, for a second time, the Cushite being overtaken by Ahimaaz, who, in a lovely detail, is recognised by the watchman on the basis of his running style. 'He is a good man, that one,' says David, 'and he will be coming with good tidings.'

Then a second word displaces **בשורה**, good news. Ahimaaz greets the king with one word: **שלום**, 'peace,' 'all is well.' Having bowed to the ground, he then delivers a fuller notice of victory, this time couched in the pious and chivalrous language of the court.

David responds with three Hebrew words: **שלום לנער לאבשלום**, literally, 'Is there peace for the lad, Absalom?'—Absalom, whose very name is composed of the two words **אב** and **שלום**: 'father' and 'peace'.

And here Ahimaaz shows himself to be craftier than Joab had supposed. He dissembles. The king dismisses him with two brusque imperatives, then focuses all his attention on the Cushite, asking him the same question he had asked Ahimaaz: השלום לנער לאבשלום. The Cushite's reply is as chilling as it is courteous: 'May the enemies of my lord the king and all those who have arisen against him be like that young man.'

The narrator gives us a portrait of David's inner anguish comprised entirely of speech and of gestures both involuntary and highly ritualised. The king's body trembles; he flees into the relative privacy of the upper room of the gate-house; weeps, and commences mourning rites for his dead son.

And here the lens of the narrator pans out magnificently to focus on David's returning army:

So it came to pass that on that day victory became mourning for all the people, for on that day the people heard it said, 'The king is distressed on account of his son.' And the people that day crept stealthily into the city, as people creep stealthily when feeling ashamed in their flight from the battlefield.

And now Joab is faced with the most difficult of his tasks for that day. He goes up to the weeping king and delivers a stinging rebuke, every word of which burns with anger:

He said, 'Today you have humiliated all your men, who have just saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and concubines. You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You have made it clear today that the commanders and their men mean nothing to you. I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead. Now go out and encourage your men.'

Joab knows that the compassion which David's men now feel for their bereaved king might shift at any moment to a justified outrage at his indifference to the danger they have faced on his behalf, and he takes decisive action. The rebuke works: David comes down from the upper room; takes his seat in the gateway, and puts himself at the disposal of his men.

Next to David, Joab is the most fascinating of all the many characters in 2 Samuel. In contrast to the mature David, so often paralysed by the strength of his emotions into a disastrous inactivity, Joab is a man of decisive deeds. His violent opposition to those he perceives to pose a threat to family and clan put him at times in clear conflict with the more finely balanced diplomacy of his king. He is not above assassinating a rival. But he does show amazing loyalty to the king, and nowhere more so than in this passage, where loyalty to the king paradoxically requires, first, a

setting aside of a direct order of David concerning his son, Absalom, and then the ringing rebuke with which he confronts the king's grief and points David to what his army and indeed the nation most need from him: his personal presence among them.

This is a passage about the callousness of grief, about the way that an unbalanced love for a dead favourite can blind someone to their duty to those still living who love them the most. Joab is right: Where are David's tears for his raped concubines? For the men who've died defending his life and the lives of his family members?

There's a wonderful passage in Freud's essay on narcissism where he speaks of the way all of us experience self-love during moments of physical pain, and quotes a mischievous verse of Goethe's about a romantic poet whose passion for his beloved is obliterated when he accidentally stubs his toe. There's a myth about suffering that insists that suffering is inherently ennobling. It isn't. Suffering turns us in on ourselves, focuses us on our own grievances and makes it hard for us to be civil to, let alone sensitive to the needs of, those caring for us. Suffering is a stern test of character in which pretty much everyone fails, no matter what sort of discipline they attempt to impose on themselves. Suffering is a deeply disturbing reminder of our limitations, both physical and moral, and the best we can say of it is that it lays bare our weaknesses and drives us to place our trust in God and not in ourselves.

When I think of the self-absorption that accompanies so much of my own suffering, what a contrast I encounter when I turn to Jesus in his suffering! 'When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly,¹' as the Apostle Peter writes. Think of Jesus providing for his mother, Mary, even as he hangs on the cross, or speaking words of life to the man crucified beside him. Jesus was never callous, was never more compassionate, in fact, than in his passion.

And this brings us to the delicate question of whether it's ever appropriate to rebuke someone in the midst of their grief. And here my advice would be: don't, unless the consequences of the person's behaviour will have major ramifications stretching into the future. Joab's rebuke was not only timely, but essential, because he wisely foresaw that if David was allowed to mourn Absalom as he wanted to, the kingdom itself would be faced with dissolution. People can say terrible things in their grief, and there is real discernment in knowing when to say nothing and to forgive in silence and when to speak out to prevent your family from tearing itself apart.

¹ 1 Peter 2:23

So far in this sermon I've had some hard things to say about David, and it's certainly true that my sympathies lie more with Joab than with the king in these verses. But there is something unutterably poignant in the words with which David reacts to the news that his son is dead:

‘O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!’

You can't listen to those words and conclude that David's grief is simply self-indulgent. Real love and real grief are to be found here. And David here is immediately recognisable to every parent who has yearned for an adult child who bears them nothing but hatred. Absalom is a monster, but he's also a son.

How can you love someone like that without showing contempt for all the people he's wounded? How can you love the prodigal without alienating the son who remains by your side? I don't even know if it's possible to do this as a human being. But I do know that it is possible for God—for God who loves the unlovely and justifies the unrighteous, but who loves elder sons and who stands in complete solidarity with every victim of the unrighteous and who has pledged to give them perfect justice on the Day of Judgement.

God loves us in all our rebelliousness with a love that far exceeds the love David had for his rebellious son Absalom. In his grief, David cried, ‘If only I had died instead of you!’ But God showed his love for us in this: ‘While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’ Or as Peter writes: ‘For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.’² At the cross God shows his determination to love sinners without sacrificing in the least his commitment to justice and to the victims of injustice. The cross is where he turns rebellious subjects into beloved sons and daughters of the living God.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,

You know us and you love us. When we suffer, please fix our eyes on Jesus. When we are callous in our grief, please forgive us. When we shy away from people who are grieving, fearful of their pain, please forgive us that, too. Thank you for your love for sinners and for those who have been sinned against. Thank you that there is no favouritism with you. Thank for your son, in whose name we pray, Amen.

² 1 Peter 3:18

