

Absalom's Rebellion

Date: 2 June, 2024

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Everlasting Kingdom - 2 Samuel

A Sermon on 2 Samuel 16:15-17:23

With today's reading we come to the most lavishly narrated sequence in the two books of Samuel: the account of Absalom's rebellion, with its epilogue in the revolt of Sheba Ben-Bikri, which extends from chapter 15 to chapter 20 of the book of 2 Samuel. The passage we've just had read for us gives us the crucial turning point in the narrative where Absalom, now in control of Jerusalem, from which his father has fled only hours before, fatefully takes counsel from the wrong man, to his eventual destruction.

The story of Absalom's rebellion is, however, subordinate to a larger question that dominates the whole of the second half of 2 Samuel, and even extends into the first two chapters of 1 Kings, and that is: Who will succeed to the throne of David? The problem first arises in the context of the childlessness of Michal, David's first wife, in 2 Samuel 6, and is then intensified by the LORD's promise to build an everlasting house for David in 2 Samuel 7. Yet a third strand is added with Nathan's prophecy delivered to David in the wake of his adultery with Bathsheba in chapter 12, where he informs the king that as a result of his contempt for the word of the LORD the sword will never depart from his house. From this moment on the book will be dominated by the death of son after son. There's even a tense moment for David when he receives what turns out to be the false report that Absalom has murdered all his sons when executing blood vengeance upon his half-brother, Amnon, in chapter 14.

Absalom, however, having fled initially to the kingdom of his maternal grandfather for asylum, is eventually reconciled to David, which the narrator portrays in two wonderful scenes. Joab, David's nephew and chief of the army, noticing that the king's heart yearns for his exiled son, effects Absalom's return to the capital by means of a fable which he puts into the mouth of a certain wise woman from Tekoa, in a parodic echo of Nathan's parable back in chapter 12; then, after the passing of two more years in which Absalom is forbidden to come before the king in person, a full reconciliation is achieved once Absalom secures Joab's further intervention on his behalf, which he does rather counter-intuitively by setting fire to the latter's barley crop.

From the two-year interval that he allows to elapse between the rape of his sister and the murder of Amnon, we have already learned that Absalom is a man who knows how to wait. He now takes another four years in which to foment and ripen a conspiracy against his father. Finally, he has himself declared king in Hebron, David's former capital to the south of Jerusalem. David is taken completely by surprise. Unsure of his support in Jerusalem, the king decides to abandon the city and flee once again into the same wilderness in which he had once eluded his father-in-law, Saul. He takes with him his wives and children, but leaves behind ten of his concubines.

David's actions and words in chapters 15 and 16 display a curious, but for David quite characteristic, combination of piety and opportunistic calculation. Hearing that his adviser Ahithophel has joined the rebellion, he prays that the Lord would 'turn his counsel into foolishness'. In the very next verse, he then encounters his friend, or counsellor, Hushai the Arkite, who has torn his robe and thrown dust on his head as a way of showing that he stands with the king in his plight. Rather than allow Hushai to accompany him into the wilderness, however, David commands him to re-enter Jerusalem and profess loyalty to the new king, while endeavouring to frustrate Ahithophel's advice and feed back information to the king in exile.

Hushai is one of several courtiers whom David encounters in his flight from Jerusalem, and while the narrator is clearly intent on painting a portrait of David in crisis, he is no less interested in the men who surround the king, and who find themselves forced to choose between the old king and his energetic and attractive heir. More than that, Absalom's rebellion lays bare tensions simmering beneath the apparent calm of the Davidic settlement. Shimei, a clansman of Saul, addresses David as 'a man of blood', and tells him that his present plight is punishment from God for 'all the blood he has shed in the household of Saul'. Ziba, the servant of Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, tells David that his master is hoping that amid all the chaos of the present moment he himself might have his grandfather Saul's kingdom restored to him. On the other hand, other members of the court display a steadfast loyalty to David, many of whom, ironically enough, are Philistine. In the meantime, Absalom's attempts to win the support of the northern tribes will eventually result in their attempted secession under Sheba Ben-Bikri in chapter 20, in a foreshadowing of the eventual split in the kingdom that will take place under David's grandson, Rehoboam.

And so to our passage for today. In our time together this morning, we'll be thinking through areas such as the giving and receiving of advice, faith and fatalism, and history and meaning, and I'll endeavour to take each of these themes in turn. Turn with me now to v. 16. Absalom and his men, together with Ahithophel, have just entered Jerusalem when they encounter Hushai,

David's freshly commissioned double agent. Hushai says to Absalom, 'Long live the king! Long live the king!'

Absalom replies, 'So this is the love you show your friend?' That word friend, אָרֵץ, is probably a technical one meaning 'counsellor', but here Absalom wants its everyday meaning to be heard, as well, and his comment throws into sharp relief the problem of what constitutes loyalty for a courtier when father and son are pitted against one another.

Hushai replies, 'No, the one chosen by the Lord, by these people, and by all the men of Israel—his I will be, and I will remain with him.' Hushai's words here are richly ironic. On the one hand, he flatters the handsome Absalom. Absalom knows (and we, too, know) that he has stolen the hearts of the men of Israel. Hushai encourages Absalom to think that worldly success must also be evidence of divine favour, just as David and those surrounding him have assumed that worldly humiliation is a sign of God's displeasure. On the other hand, you'll notice that Hushai has so far avoided naming Absalom, so when he reiterates his commitment to serving 'the king', we as readers know that the king Hushai intends to serve is not Absalom, but his father, David.

Absalom now turns to Ahithophel for counsel. Ahithophel advises Absalom to sleep with the concubines whom David had left behind in his flight from Jerusalem, which Absalom promptly carries out on the palace roof in view of all Israel, the same roof, incidentally, from which David had gazed upon the bathing Bathsheba back in chapter 11. Given that Absalom has previously portrayed himself as the defender of his sister Tamar's honour, there is something indescribably vile about this scene, even for us at our distance from the events.

There are two things, however, which modern readers may miss about what Absalom does here, and both are worth drawing attention to. Firstly, in the Ancient Near East, commentators point out, the possession of a harem is seen as the king's prerogative. By appropriating David's harem, Absalom is styling himself as the new king, and to this extent Absalom's behaviour here is of a piece with his earlier acquisition of horses back in chapter 15, together with the way he intercepts those seeking an audience with the king. Secondly, it's worth attending to Ahithophel's own line of reasoning in v. 21, where he argues that by taking over the harem 'all Israel will know that you have made yourself obnoxious to your father, and the hands of everyone with you will be more resolute.' Ahithophel, just like the canny Joab back in chapter 14, is well aware of David's fondness for his son. Should things go badly for Absalom, he may well be tempted to take advantage of that fondness in order to come to terms with his father. But Absalom's co-

conspirators could not, of course, count on clemency for themselves. Ahithophel's advice is therefore designed to make such a reconciliation impossible, and thus to give Absalom's would-be supporters confidence that he will not betray them into David's hands should the rebellion fail.

Ahithophel's next piece of advice is to have twelve thousand men set out immediately in pursuit of David; to startle him, to isolate him from his men, then kill him when he is on his own. Ahithophel's strategy is based on speed and containment, seeking to avoid the outbreak of outright civil war. As readers, we know from David's dejected state, and from the tensions within the kingdom laid bare by Absalom's revolt, that this is excellent advice, couched as it in Ahithophel's characteristically concise language. But almost as an afterthought, Absalom then turns to his latest acquisition, Hushai, and asks for his advice, as well. Hushai replies by giving the speech of his life:

Hushai replied to Absalom, "The advice that Ahithophel has given is not good this time. You know your father and his men; they are fighters, and as fierce as a wild bear robbed of her cubs. Besides, your father is an experienced fighter; he will not spend the night with the troops. Even now, he is hidden in a cave or some other place."

Piling up vivid metaphors, Hushai invokes the legend of David's wilderness years. He emphasises David's past as a wily, seasoned warrior, returning to the theme in v. 10. He then urges Absalom to wait until he has gathered a fighting force from all Israel, and then to fall upon David with overwhelming force, 'as dew settles on the ground.'

Such is the author's skill that he has made us as readers want Absalom to disregard the laconic, wise advice of Ahithophel in favour of the duplicitous, rhetorically flamboyant counsel of Hushai. And that is just what Absalom does. Hushai sends another two of David's spies out to alert the king of what will befall him should Absalom decide to follow Ahithophel's advice after all, while Ahithophel, in a haunting coda, perceiving that his advice has not been taken, saddles his donkey, sets out for his house in his home town, puts his house in order, and then hangs himself.

As you might expect, there's a diversity of opinion amongst critics as to *when* these chapters of 2 Samuel were penned, but there is, nonetheless, something approaching consensus as regards the question, *For whom* were they written? This, scholars judge, is a history written for courtiers, and plainly, our historian is a man for whom knowing what advice to give a king or prince is of enormous interest and importance. Already in our series so far, we've seen the temptation

counsellors face to tailor their advice to suit the whims of their masters. Jonadab son of Shimeah is the most egregious example of this type of counsellor, drawing out the illicit passion of Amnon for his half-sister, and then masterminding a way to satisfy it. But we also think of Joab, whose long acquaintance with David allows him to see that the king's heart yearns for his exiled son, and who then devises a scheme to facilitate Absalom's return. Equally, the narrative throws up men such as Nathan in chapter 12 and, to anticipate somewhat, Joab himself in chapter 19, men who are able to give counsel that challenges the king's personal desires and sets before him a higher duty, whether to God and his word as in chapter 12, or to the nation and army, as in chapter 19.

But this is also an author who plainly loves words and the rhetoric in which such counsel is clothed, behind whom stands all those verses in the Book of Proverbs about how to address a king, and how to sift conflicting pieces of advice. Now, the situation in which Hushai finds himself is obviously quite exceptional, and whether deceit can ever be practiced by a Christian has famously been answered both negatively (as for example, by Kant) and positively (as by Bonhoeffer). But rather than applying these verses to ourselves straightaway, we do well, I think, to see how the theme of giving and accepting counsel finds its fulfilment in Jesus. According to John, Jesus knows what is in a person's heart. According to Mark, Jesus knows what is in the rich young man's heart and whose challenging word to him arises out of his love for him. In the New Testament, the mark of the false teacher is that he tailors his teaching to what the itching ears of his hearers long to hear. The preaching of the apostles in Acts, however, cuts to the heart of those who listen to them. The Holy Spirit, too, is spoken of as the Counsellor in John 14, because he directs us back to God's word to us in Christ, much as Nathan directed David back to the word of the LORD in 2 Samuel 12. From all of which we can say that Christian counsel is sensitive to both the yearnings and the weaknesses of the human heart: it's empathetic, and benevolent; and at the same time it's courageous, confident not only that God deserves to be honoured but also that his words are words of life.

The second thing I want to speak to this morning is the theme of faith and fatalism that runs through these verses. Two characters in these chapters face searing experiences of rejection, but how they react to rejection has a poignant lesson for us in discerning the difference that faith in God makes in a world in which everyone experiences her own fair share of rejection and disappointment. Chapter 15 presents us with what von Rad describes as David's Gethsemane. As David in his flight from the city ascends the Mount of Olives he finds himself pelted with stones and abuse, as Shimei, Saul's clansman, reviles him as a 'man of blood'. Shimei's action

can really only be rationalised either as the act of a man deranged by years of privately nursed hatred or as a prophetic speech-act, because, as David is still surrounded by his loyal bodyguard, his words and acts should properly cost him his head. But David intervenes, saying to Shimei's would-be assassin, 'If he is cursing because the Lord said to him, "Curse David," who can ask, "Why do you do this?" And then he adds, 'My son, my own flesh and blood, is trying to kill me. How much more, then, this Benjaminite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look on my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today.'

Along with the stones and abuse, it's important to see here that Shimei is providing a theological interpretation of David's predicament which casts it as divine retribution for David's role in the downfall of Saul's family. David does not disagree, although he does note rather sardonically that being cursed by a clansman of Saul pales into insignificance when your own son is trying to kill you. But the main thing to emphasise here is that David approaches the future with an openness that is the fruit of his trust in God's character. David is utterly convinced that his God is a God of grace, who shows unending kindness to those who have no right to call upon it. And so no situation, not even this one, is entirely without hope. There's so much in 1 and 2 Samuel that encourages us as readers simply to write David off as nothing more than a despot. And David, as one commentator notes, really *is* a despot—but he's a despot whose impulses are being continually shaped and challenged by his relationship with the living Lord.

Contrast David's situation in chapter 15 with that of Ahithophel in chapter 16. Ahithophel sees his sound advice passed over in favour of the duplicitous, rhetorically inflated counsel of Hushai, and knows at once that the rebellion is destined to fail. His suicide is an eerily tidy affair, leaving as little as possible for his family to sort through after his death; he even travels to his home town so no one will have to fetch him back to the family burial plot. But there's no hope here; no room left over for a future stretching beyond the failure of Absalom's revolt. Suicides in the Bible are very rarely encountered, given their comparative frequency today as well as in other cultures such as that of ancient Rome, and I don't have space here to broach what will be for many of us a very painful and fraught subject, but it is worth noting that suicide, either in fact or as a possibility, appears three times in 1 and 2 Samuel: here; again at the deaths of Saul and his armour bearer in 1 Samuel 21, and thirdly after the death of Bathsheba's child in 2 Samuel 18, where David's courtiers worry that 'he may do something desperate' in his grief. While I would caution against over-theologising suicide as an expression of despair, and I would always urge people to avoid committing suicide primarily because of the pain it inflicts on surviving family

members, it's true, nevertheless, that we do live in a world starved of hope, a world where people display a high degree of pessimism with regard to the future. So when we, too, experience crushing rejection and disappointment, the clear thing for Christians to do is to keep our eyes on Jesus, who, in the words of Peter, 'entrusted himself to him who judges justly.'

And this brings us to the third theme I want to draw out today: that of meaning and history. The author of these chapters stands alongside Thucydides and Tacitus as one of the three great historians of antiquity, and like them he is a master when it comes to creating a narrative where each event flows seamlessly out of the one that precedes it, and where each character in the narrative is drawn with utterly convincing strokes, most often through dialogue. With cause and effect so tightly linked; with its loving focus on human character and motivation, one might well ask: Is there any room for God in this narrative?

Famously, at only three points in the Succession Narrative does the author remove the veil to show God's control over the human events unfolding below. The chief one, of course, occurs, in *our* passage, after Absalom judges that Hushai's advice is better than that of Ahithophel, at which point the narrator writes, 'For the LORD had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom.' But rather than viewing the Succession Narrative as a basically secular document to which its author has given a veneer of conventional piety, critics are unanimous in seeing here a profoundly theological consciousness. Here, for example, is the typical, and highly influential, judgement of Gerhard von Rad. He writes:

Jahweh's control takes in all that happens. It does not let itself be seen intermittently in holy miracles; it is as good as hidden from the natural eye: but it continuously permeates all departments of life, public and private, religious and secular alike. The special field where this control of history operates is the human heart, whose impulses and resolves Jahweh in sovereign fashion makes subservient to his plan for history.

What von Rad is saying here, is that according to the author of this part of the Bible, God not only sees into the most worldly aspects of our lives and into the inmost depths of our hearts, but that he also *actively shapes what goes on there* with a view to larger purposes being worked out over the course of history. Elsewhere von Rad elaborates upon this so as to draw out a doctrine of dual causality, in which humans bear full responsibility for what they do, even as God shapes human thoughts and actions in such a way as to bring about his own purposes in history.

We live in an age which is rightly suspicious of metanarratives. Too many individual lives have been squandered in building visions of a future which then failed to materialise. Should we not

then conclude that history is fundamentally meaningless, and that the best we can hope for is to preserve individual liberties in which people create meaning for themselves within the transience of their individual existence? This is the world we live in; this is the air we breathe. But it is not the world of 2 Samuel; and it is not in the end the world as it actually is if we are all in the hands of the living God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In that world, in that deeper, truer world that lies behind the false world we imagine for ourselves, all things are destined to be gathered up in Jesus and will find their ultimate meaning in him, the author and perfecter of our faith. And so for us the future is not closed, and the sadness of this world is only ever penultimate, never ultimate. The night will not hold us. We belong to the Day.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,

Please help us to entrust ourselves to you when we face rejection and disappointment. Help us to have a confidence in the future that is based on your steadfast love for us and for all you've made. Please help us to be both sensitive and courageous when we're asked to give advice, and both humble and discerning when receiving it. Help us to take you with absolute seriousness when you say that all things will find their fulfilment in Christ, or not at all, and to live our lives accordingly. In his name, Amen.