

Park Road, 20 June 2021.

David and Bathsheba: 2 Samuel 11 – 12.15.

Some years ago, I was privileged to do a short teaching stint at Whiteley College, the Baptist College in Melbourne. On Sundays I was wont to turn up at a different church, usually following up on an encounter or a commendation. One Sunday, I found myself in the middle of a series of sermons on David. That day it happened to be David and Bathsheba. The minister, perhaps with a twinkle in his eye, began by saying he was going to disappoint the congregation. It was not a sermon on lust or adultery. This, he said, is a story about power. And he was right.

One hot, sultry afternoon, David looked from the palace down into his neighbour's garden. There was Bathsheba, cooling off in the pool. His head was turned. She was beautiful. But distance and forbidden fruit were no barriers to David. Was he not the king? What he desired he could have! Did he not say to his servants: 'Come! And they came. Go! And they went!?' (Mt. 8.9) Moreover, it was possible to cover up the situation, avoiding awkward questions and a public outcry. Quickly! Get Uriah dispatched! A hint to his trusty friend the general could mean that Uriah disappeared, another casualty of war. Just arrange it. Uriah could not object or protest because he was put in the front line. Indeed, it was almost an honour to be so picked out and to face death. Moreover, Uriah was a Hittite; a foreigner, possibly an immigrant or a mercenary.

This is a scenario that is surely only too familiar, played out in many forms and disguises. 'I want and therefore I can have!' And we need not be too careful as to how it is presented. The news is full of stories of the abuse of power, whether of position, wealth or connection; of personal or political furthered by subterfuge, deceit or simply covered up.

The surprising thing is that the Bible does not shy away from the failings of its heroes. They are depicted, as Oliver Cromwell demanded, 'Warts and all!'. Think of Moses, Samson, Solomon, Peter and even Paul himself, and many more. It underlines Paul's point, 'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God'. (Rom. 3.23) This is not simply to exonerate anyone or to forget, but to underline the important and saving truth that God values and can use the 'earthen vessel'. (2Cor.4.7) Despite being frail and failing, God can, through the Spirit, use us, even us, in his Kingdom. Therefore, we should not lose hope.

His love encompasses us as we are. David remains as king, even a great king, for ever held in regard.

Lord Acton, the eminent nineteenth century historian, put it succinctly: 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. We can almost certainly list our prime examples. Most of us will have lived through or been affected by the 'era of the dictators', which dominated the twentieth century: Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung; and, today, there are controlling regimes across the world. But Acton suggests that this is but the tip of the iceberg, for all power 'tends to corrupt'. Power brings with it temptation, and, as we have been taught by Jesus, we must for ever be praying to be led away from 'the time of testing'. (Mt. 6.13) For power comes in many guises: wealth, position, expertise, social custom, accident of birth. Each of these is open to perversion. Sin, the propensity to put self at the centre, to ask first how things affect me at the expense of others, is always present, not always blatantly but subtly, pulling us away from a proper concern for 'seeking first the Kingdom of heaven' (Mt. 6.33), the well-being of others, to, What's in it for me? Yet power is necessary. Without power human existence is impossible and all would descend into chaos. We have been given the ability to use the gifts of the creation – to sustain our daily living, to find food and shelter. There have to be social structures – laws, governance, customs and economic exchange, enquiry and learning. Why are we so anxious that the present student generation should not be disadvantaged by loss of tuition by reason of Covid? Because they will lose the opportunity to gain the power to enter into the employment market! We all participate in this nexus of relationship, obligation and consumption. The question is not: Can we avoid the challenge and demands of power, but how do we, as human beings, as citizens, in our personal and corporate relations, exercise the responsibilities of the power given to us. We may not be very high in the 'food chain', appearing not to have much power. Nevertheless, we can and do affect the situation we are in.

This brings us to our second lead figure: Nathan, the prophet. In the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, the books we know as I and II Samuel and I and II Kings, with Joshua, are known as 'The Former Prophets'; followed by the 'Latter Prophets', the writing prophets from Isaiah to Malachi. This would suggest that the key focus for the so-called history books are the prophetic figures: Samuel, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha, at least as much as the court history. So, this is the story of Nathan as much as of David.

Nathan, like Samuel before him and later Elijah and Elisha, were seen as wise men, seers, to whom it was possible to turn for insight and advice; and as such seem, loosely, to be attached to the court, a position present till the end of the monarchy at the fall of Jerusalem. Nathan's task, therefore, was to monitor and mentor the king; to be the voice of faith, reason and obedience in the hurly burly and business of national and palace life; to bring God's word of encouragement and insight and warning. So out of the shadows Nathan emerges onto the scene, exercising his privilege and power to tell David just how things were stacking up. His task was 'to speak truth to power'. This has been a key prophetic task down the ages; keeping the flame of obedience alight so that its flickering light might illumine the shadows of our lives. John the Baptist lost his head for rebuking Herod Antipas. Jesus, himself, was not averse to challenging 'the powers that be'. (Rom. 13.1) 'Go tell that fox (Herod Antipas), I must be on my way' (Luke 13.32); and at the cleansing of the Temple (Luke 19.45-6). And the Church still has a prophetic task, to wrestle with the complexities of a very different world and to seek to witness to those things that make for a just and peaceful society and world. The prophetic word of Micah remains: 'to do justly and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God'. (6.8) Today there may not be so much: 'Thus says the Lord'; it may indeed seem somewhat muted, inevitably in a secular society; but there are many times and places where, in Christ's name, the challenge is made on behalf of the Levitical 'widow and orphan and stranger in the midst', for 'justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream' (Amos 5.24) There are bishops in the House of Lords; there are key institutes researching 'faith and society'; campaigning bodies like Tear Fund, Christian Aid or A Rocha; Christians Against Poverty, Hope into Action, Light Project Peterborough and a host of other groups act striving to for justice and hope for individuals and in our social structures. It is interesting to see, in the press, how often such groups are mentioned; not least at a crucial time for the planet's economic and environmental future as we emerge from Covid 19. And many, many Christians are, through their daily work or volunteering, seek to further the realities of the Kingdom.

So, Nathan intervened. He caught the king's attention through a story. Here we have another strong Biblical tradition, taken up and used to perfection by Jesus. Parables ask us to think our way into a reality through the imagination. You know this story: the theft of a poor man's lamb to meet the whim and immediate needs of the rich and unscrupulous neighbour. David's ingrained

sense of justice, of what was right before God, kicks in. 'Exactly!' said Nathan, 'just like yourself. But you clearly know better.'

As king, David had been given sovereignty over Israel. He was responsible for them before God. Embedded in the Hebrew tradition was a particular and, for those times, a unique understanding of what that meant. The king was the Father of his people. His responsibility was to lead and defend the nation and, internally, to administer impartial justice, to ensure peace and the welfare of the people, especially of the poor and vulnerable. The symbol of this was the king sitting in the gate of the city, the busy crossroads and business centre just inside the city walls. Here he was accessible and visible to all, exercising judgement without fear or favour.

This was echoed by Jesus. When James and John were anticipating the arrival of the Kingdom and sought pride of place, Jesus asked them whether they knew what they were letting themselves in for! 'Can you be baptised with the baptism I am baptised?' (Mk. 10.39) What is the power you are looking for? To lord it over others? To have wealth, authority and prestige? Or to serve and offer a life of service, to be a resource for others? To succour the needy? The Gentiles – the Romans and the Persians, with their triumphal arches and over large statues. As do all who seek 'empire' - exercise power by force of arms, imposition of imperial law, contesting and defending their power and status. But Jesus power is that of service, of care and responsibility. That is not an abdication of power but directing it into proper channels, giving in order to serve the common good, upholding and defending the other, embracing the opportunity to support and encourage. This is the 'living way' (Jn. 14.6-7) that is found in Jesus and which is found in the lives of so many who, so often in unassuming and hidden ways, find the meaning of their lives in the service of others and in caring for the bonds and fabric of society, who go about their daily lives seeking the good of family friend and neighbour, who will sacrifice for the welfare of others; be it in and through their chosen professions and careers or within the exercise of their daily tasks. For these we should thank God, as we share with them the life of Christ.

In him shall true hearts everywhere

Their high communion find,

His service is the golden cord

Close binding all mankind.

And this is, also, the power of God. The opening of the creed is: 'We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty'. Two things are brought together here that, possibly, at first glance, are strange bed fellows. God is almighty, most powerful, creator out of nothing; who can barge into any situation, crush his enemies, get things done. There are suggestions in the Bible along these lines. But as Christians, we want to affirm that God is Father, revealed in the Suffering Servant, Jesus, who cares and cherishes, who seeks the lost, who comes alongside, a Paraclete, bearing with us in our weakness, fearfulness and brokenness, who forgives and restores. Can these be held together?

Let me offer a parable, based on a true incident. A friend of mine visited the nuclear power station at Hinkley Point, in Somerset. At one point during the tour he realised that he was standing immediately above the reactors; that just beneath his feet the massive energy of nature was being harnessed in the service of humanity. The power of the atom, which had been split with such devastating consequences over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was the same power that is present in every atom and constitutes the force of everything in creation. It is that power, chained and controlled, in the flower of the field or the grass that is cast into the oven (Mt. 6.25-30), which allows our universe to exist, for our planet to carry life. God's power is hidden in the depths of reality, held in check and yet supremely fruitful. This is offered most clearly in and through Jesus the Christ. In Matthew's account of the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus responds to the attempt to defend him, which results in the High Priest's slave's ear being cut off: 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you not think I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled?' (Matt. 26.52-4) Thus 'great David's greater Son' exercises his power.

The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak;

They rode but thou didst stumble to a throne;

But to our wounds God's wounds alone can speak;

And not a god has wounds but thee alone. (Edward Shillito)