

Reflection 8/8/21 **2 Samuel 18:1, 5-15, 31-33, 19: 1-8 GNB**

Imagine the scene if you will...

A dark brooding forest. All around, running feet, shouts, cries and the clash of weapons reverberate. A group of men stand panting round the bloody, battered body of a young man dead on the ground under a low limbed oak tree.

Their leader stands a little apart, a battle-scarred warrior with a weary, determined expression.

The words "Don't harm the young man Absalom" hang in the air for a few minutes, then the commander gestures for the bugle to sound.

Gradually the forest quiets as fighting ceases, the defeated slink or drag themselves away and the victorious troops return to their units. No bird call sounds and even the trickle of blood stained water in the gully is subdued.

There is no mystery about this murder. We know who is responsible.

But there is a back story, a complex network of relationships between the people involved. Much is revealed about the main character, David and those around him in the choices they make. And we may recognise some truths about our own processes as we witness the choices made.

According to 2 Samuel 14:25, Absalom was a personable young man with a luxuriant head of hair and a perfect body. He was also a bit of a people pleaser and enjoyed the trappings of his royal position. He especially liked to ride round in his chariot with 50 men running ahead of him as kings did in those days. Absalom initially got offside with his father when he orchestrated the killing of his half brother in revenge for the rape of his sister. After being exiled for three years, David forgave Absalom and allowed him to return to court. Big mistake! Absalom, rather than being grateful and loyal, started building up a following of his own, currying favour and stirring up trouble. Eventually he led a rebellion against David which resulted in the battle described in our reading today, and in his own violent death.

Joab was a very different kettle of fish. He served David for many years as military commander. He is portrayed as a ruthless and decisive man who acts to achieve his own ends. But he was also useful to David in carrying out some of the less savoury tasks we can read of in 2 Samuel. So when David seduces a beautiful woman called Bathsheba and she becomes pregnant, it is Joab he calls on to put her husband, in a dangerous position in battle so that he is killed. There is risk in dealing with such unscrupulous people as Joab

though. His action in murdering Absalom, against David's direct orders was expedient, but causes David intense grief.

David is the most nuanced character in these scenes. Throughout the book of Samuel many aspects of his personality are revealed. We see him young and fearless, killing Goliath, and as a harpist, playing music to soothe the troubled King Saul. Later he flees for his life from the jealous King and lives as a fighter and mercenary, though refusing to harm King Saul when the chance arises. After Saul's death on the battlefield David, celebrated as a valiant warrior, becomes a much respected King and nation builder. Division and political intrigue continue to dog his steps however, and he also lacks the ability to keep his family relationships harmonious and healthy. The quality of his relationship with God is shown in his sincere repentance after he is called to account for his affair with Bathsheba and the killing of her husband. And his joy and reverence for God is shown when he dances uninhibitedly in celebration while bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.

Turning our focus back to the reading from 2 Samuel that Marilyn read for us.....

The intense scene at the murder of Absalom shifts to a view of a King in despair. Take a moment to look carefully at the picture on the front of the order of service.

This is British artist Frederic Leighton's painting of this moment.

What do you notice about the background and sky? Do you see David's heavy robes, his posture and facial expression? The crown cast down.... But are there gleams of light to be seen perhaps? and the two doves, top right, symbols of peace and God's presence.....

Looking at this picture I recognise that Absalom is not the only vulnerable person in this story. David is vulnerable too, despite all the trappings of power.

In the depths of David's grief, Joab comes to confront him with the effects of his grief stricken reactions to Absalom's death, and the probable consequences. We might recall an earlier occasion in David's life when a similar event occurred. Then David was confronted by the prophet Nathan about the incident with Bathsheba.

These are both difficult, painful situations and different sides of David's personality come to the fore. On both occasions David loses a son. He

experiences strong emotional turmoil causing him to reflect on his life and his actions. And, after being confronted, he reconsiders and changes direction.

But there are differences in these two happenings. As the prophet Nathan confronts David and events move to their conclusion, David clearly expresses his connection with God. He is forthright and direct and accepts responsibility for his behaviour. His actions in response are in synch with his deepest beliefs. Although there is much pain and grief, David and Bathsheba appear able to move on, (and in fact have four other children, including Solomon, David's chosen successor as King).

When Joab confronts David, on the other hand, his response is much more ambivalent and half hearted. Perhaps it is just the way the events are described, as we are not told David's inner thoughts and feelings at this time. I think it is highly likely that David is deeply upset and angry with Joab for his part in the death of Absalom. He may feel some responsibility himself. But he also realises that Joab's advice to support the downcast troops is valid. So David's actions on this occasion are largely politically motivated, done in spite of his feelings of grief and pain. He may show courage and true leadership in both situations but we are left with a feeling of heaviness and lack of resolution.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman has this to say about David

“One ought not to be surprised that the truth offered here, the man disclosed here, is not a simple, unambiguous piece..... The truth comes relentlessly packaged in ambiguity, inscrutability, polyvalence. The truth of David here yields no certitude, certainly not any facticity, but nonetheless glimpses of reality” (Brueggeman, 1985 p15-7).

I've recently become more aware of how complex and transitory truth is in my own life. I'm in the process of completing my Professional Portfolio for my ongoing registration as a nurse. Part of that process involves describing situations at work and how I have responded to them. Trying to capture the essence of these moments and reflecting on my decisions, has brought benefits beyond the need to prove my competency. It's made me recognise how many different factors are at play in the situations I encounter and also how they change almost as soon as I write them down. There are back stories and complex networks of relationships here too, that need to be understood.

Despite that, I feel my reflections do occasionally reveal small “glimpses of reality”. They are not perfect, but they do convey something of my struggle to express my deepest values in the ever shifting situations of my working life.

We don't always take the time to reflect on the moments of our lives in this way. But you may have needed to do a similar thing in your work role. Or perhaps you like to journal, paint or do collage work to reflect on the raw material of your life. Patterns emerge and in recognising them we can be gradually freer to choose how we will be.

Like David, we can experience times of tribulation when despite everything, we feel deeply connected to what sustains us. Like David, there might be times when we make more pragmatic decisions, and are left with heavy hearts and lingering doubts.

Each of our lives has its own history and complexity, a mix of issues overcome and ongoing, wounds healed or still aching. But as we reflect quietly on what is happening inside us in response to external events, space opens for something new to happen. We may be able to distinguish, despite the darkness and doubt, small gleams of light. And hear, hovering nearby, the fluttering wings of God's peace and presence.

References:

Brueggeman. W. (1985) "David's truth in Israel's imagination and memory"
Fortress Press, Philadelphia, USA

"David: "Oh, that I had wings like a Dove! For then would I fly away, and be at rest." Frederick Leighton

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