

**ADDRESS**

24 June 2018

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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1 Samuel 17. 32-49	David and Goliath
Psalms 9.9-20	The Lord the stronghold
2 Corinthians 6.1-13	Dissension in the early church
Mark 4.35-41	Jesus calms the wind

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A prayer of Moses, a prayer for each of us:

*May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb. For I will proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God! (Deut. 32:2-3).*

During my 30 years or so as a journalist, I learned that the primary generator of news is conflict – the more intense the conflict, the more people involved, the closer the conflict to us, the greater the news value, the bigger the story, whether we are dealing with war, or politics, or the vagaries of the elements, like bushfires or volcanic eruptions.

That's why Donald Trump is such a godsend to the media – he generates conflict wherever he goes, whenever he speaks.

The Bible, too, contains many stories about conflict, about the eternal conflict between good and evil. Stories about man's fall and God's redemption. Today our three readings are all about conflict of various kinds, and they each have a message for us.

Over the past few weeks we have been reading some of the stories from one account of the history of the early Jewish kingdom, stories that many of us will remember from Sunday School. Today we have the best-known story of all – about how young David the shepherd boy warrior killed the giant Goliath, armed only with a slingshot and the power of faith.

Journalists and novelists will often call a conflict between unequals a David and Goliath struggle, without knowing much about the Bible story, and without any reference to the power of God which made David's victory possible. Later in the book of Samuel we can read how another Israelite warrior killed the brother of Goliath, who was apparently just as tall and just as fearsome, but this battle was more of a contest between equals, so it is less interesting, less newsworthy.

How many of us know the name of the warrior who killed Lahmi, the brother of Goliath? . . . .  
(Elhanan – 1 Chr.20.5)

The Hebrew text of the four books of the kingdoms, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, has been corrupted during centuries of copying, and, as a result, there are some apparent contradictions in

the details of the record, compared with the account of the same period in the two books of the Chronicles, which are written from a different perspective. But it appears that, at this stage of his life, David was spending some of his time caring for his father's sheep, and some time as King Saul's armour bearer. So when the Philistines challenged, it was natural for David to leave the sheep and come to visit the three of his brothers who were fighting in Saul's army.

His eldest brother was not pleased to see him. A few verses before today's reading begins, we read that he greeted him with, *Why have you left the sheep? Have you just come to watch the battle?* Not even the threat of defeat at the hands of the Philistines can ease the family conflict after the elder brothers were passed over and youngest brother, David, was anointed as the next king of Israel. When Goliath taunts the Israelites, and challenges them to decide the battle by single combat, David steps forward and Saul is happy to let him be his army's champion.

The account goes on to tell us that, when Goliath fell, the Philistines fled. Saul's army chased after them and killed many of them and David cut off Goliath's head and took it to Jerusalem as a trophy. The moral of the story is summed up in a single verse, verse 47, *The battle is the Lord's, and he will give you the victory.* This was the message Saul's army needed to hear, and this is the lesson we all need to learn when we are faced with a challenge that seems too big for us to deal with alone, like the end of a marriage, or the loss of a job, even serious illness or approaching death. As the great hymn puts it *I triumph still, if thou abide with me.*

Today's Gospel is a short account of how Jesus calmed one of the storms which periodically sweep across the Sea of Galilee, as the winds swirl around the narrow space between the surrounding hills. The three Synoptic Gospels all place this story in the context of Jesus' parables of the kingdom-- here is a teacher whose works testify to the truth of his words. Even the power of the elements is no match for the power of the Son of God. The conflict can have only one outcome.

Again the message for us is in Jesus' question, *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?* 'After all you have heard and seen? Don't you know me well enough to believe in me and trust me? Matthew phrases the question even more bluntly, *Why are you afraid, you of little faith?* Luke's version is softer, *Where is your faith?* But the message is clear – if we have too little faith in our loving God, we will be afraid of the future, afraid even of death. We need to live in the spirit of the psalm of David, the shepherd boy warrior:

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. (Psalm 23.4)*

The rod is a Biblical symbol of God's corrective discipline; the staff is a symbol of God's power over sin and death, even over fear. Together, both can free us from our fears. As one of John's letters teaches, when we love God we are afraid of nothing, because perfect love drives out fear. ( I John 4.18) Again, the conflict can have only one outcome.

The moral of this story is not that God will rush in to help us when we are caught in a storm or an earthquake or some other natural disaster. This is a story about the uniqueness of Jesus – the man who was fully God, as his Father and his Spirit are fully God: as the disciples said in awe *Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?* There was no-one like him before him, and there has been no one like him since. He is the One without equal.

However, some scholars believe that the Gospel writers recorded this story to bring a message of hope to an early church, a church suffering persecution, a church in conflict, a church divided by fear and conflicting teaching, by an unwillingness to give up old ways and walk in the new Way, the way of the risen Jesus.

This is Paul's message in our Epistle reading today, which continues the theme of the passage we read last week – *If anyone is in Christ he (or she) is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.* (2 Cor. 5.17) But in Corinth, the old lingered, many members of the church had accepted the grace of God in vain, they had accepted it superficially, and false teachers had come by and misled many of them by telling them they had to work for their salvation.

Reading Paul's letters, I sometimes think I would have given up on the Corinthians long ago, they seem such a wretched lot, sometimes! Yet Paul persevered, he seems to have spent more time in Corinth than anywhere else, preaching Christ to its mixed population of half a million Greeks, Romans and Jews. Corinth was one of the largest cities of the empire; it was notorious for sexual immorality, which was fostered by the cult of Aphrodite, focused on a temple of love high up in the city acropolis, a temple which attracted licentious people from all over the empire.

Paul had to deal with the conflict between physical love and divine love, and the conflict was bruising. He suffered physical and mental trials, he lists them: *afflictions, hardships and calamities*; he suffered sustained opposition: *beatings, imprisonments and riots*; he endured personal strains: *labours, sleepless nights and hunger*, yet he persevered, sustained by the power of God, and by the belief that he had come to the city at the right time – *now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation.* (v.2 ) Just as Isaiah knew the time for the children of Israel to be brought home to Zion, so Paul knew the time for the people of Corinth to come home to God.

Paul had seen many lives changed in Corinth, we know that from his letters, yet his mission was not complete -- many people had not accepted the message, and some were defaming him, calling him an imposter, a false teacher, a nobody, whereas he saw himself as their loving father in God, and urged the people to open their hearts to his message.

At our baptism, or when we renewed our baptismal vows, we undertook to take God's side in the continuing conflict between God's love and the empty display and false values of the world and the sinful desires of the flesh; to take the side of good against evil. We need the power of God to be faithful to our vows. Sometimes we have to fight our desire for warmth and comfort to be here by 8 o'clock especially on these cold winter mornings.

The love of money and of power are just two of the many obstacles to mission today, especially in the Western world – even in the church, we do not have to look far to see the love of money proving stronger than the love of God. To the lure of money or power we could add the material prosperity which makes many people feel they do not need God, and the fear of becoming distant from friends or family by joining a church, and the intolerance and extremism at the edges of all religions, and the criminal behavior of some professing believers, and the cults of consumerism and individualism, and sport and sex . . . you can make a long list of spiritual enemies: the list might be as long as Paul's lists of his adversities, and of the qualities he displayed in the power of the Spirit.

In 1910, representatives of the majority of Christian missionary organisations met in Edinburgh for the first time, in the first World Missionary Conference. The delegates faced as many problems as the missionary+es face today, yet the delegates went back to their home countries encouraged by the stories of men and women and children being won to Christ in all parts of the world, and excited by the challenge posed by one of the delegates from the United States, the Methodist layman and Nobel prizewinner John R. Mott.

Mott urged the delegates to *"Take your stumbling-blocks and turn them into stepping-stones."* This a motto we could all embrace as we strive to bring the message of God's love to the suburbs we live in and the people we know. This is how we can win the continuing conflict between good and evil in our own lives, and in our own time.

Jesus still says to us, and to all believers, *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?* #

*Lord, give us the faith that can move mountains and help us to be faithful to our promises,  
We ask through Jesus Christ your Son, our teacher, our example and our Lord. AMEN.*