



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 20th June 2021

Readings: II Samuel 17, I Corinthians 6.1-13, Mark 6.35-41

I imagine we all wake up each day with an agenda for the next eighteen hours. Of course, it may just be to survive, if life is in a difficult phase. Others of us will have a diary with wall-to-wall appointments. Again, survival is our aim. And then there is the half-way house of facing a day with various fixed staging posts – the shopping, golf, a meeting at church, coffee with a pal - and enough free time to enjoy and to relax.

Just as a particular day may have an agenda, so we might have an agenda for the whole of our lives, too. Maybe we have aspirations we wish to see fulfilled, goals we want to reach, responsibilities we cannot avoid – nor should we, convictions that stir us to campaign for a good cause here, and oppose an injustice there.

In the same way, working alongside you all to ensure we are the best we can be as Downing Place Church, I am aware we have a challenging agenda. We have been given much, and as the good book has it, ‘from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.’¹ Enabling worship that draws people into an encounter with the living God; reaching out into the community revealing the love of God; growing together as two churches that are becoming one in a witness to the reconciling God.

Whatever the agenda of any given day, we will have our own ways of dealing with it. Strategies. Tactics. Game plans. Unless your life more extemporaneous, shaped by improvisation and impulse? And the phone call that tells you the appointment you forgot.

Today’s readings described four different people and how they addressed their agenda. Reading from the Hebrew scriptures, we met *Goliath*, the Philistines’ champion, ... whose height was six cubits and a span’. His agenda was ‘to defy the ranks of Israel’. We were re-introduced to *David*, the youthful shepherd boy who was more distinguished by his ruddy good looks than by his warring prowess. All his fellow Israelites having fled for fear of the Philistine giant, David’s agenda was to prevail over him. In the Epistle, we learned something more of *Paul*, as he wrote to the Corinthians about his agenda for discipleship and ministry. And in the Gospel, we found ourselves with *Jesus* in a boat, when ‘a great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped’. ‘Where will my help come from?’² He was stressing his disciples by his complete inattentiveness to the storm, let alone to any more absorbing an agenda.

As we pursue the agenda of our own lives, and of this branch of the church of Jesus Christ, is there anything we might gain from how these four pursued their agenda?

Goliath is an impressive character, both in his physical enormity, and in his sheer arrogance. He alerts us to the dangers of pursuing our agenda by the threat of brute force, or by belittling and intimidating others. Yet, as unattractive as he is in this narrative, it is a picture that speaks of many a despot in history, and of too many in today’s newspapers. Only this month, the voices of some nations’ leaders ranged against those of other nations shows how near the surface bellicose rhetoric really is. It is, you see, rather easy to be a Goliath when you can hide behind the protection of social media or of a rigged election. But it’s actually too easy to be a Goliath when you are six foot three, or when you are rather intelligent, or rather articulate. Goliath stands as a warning to us all about how not to pursue our agenda.

¹ Luke 12.48

² Psalm 121.1

Even though we know of the wicked misuse of power, the David and Goliath story tells of the *greater* power of David's five small stones. Now, although they, too, were used for violent purpose, which I would not countenance, are we perhaps meant to see them as symbolic of the different approach David brought?

1. Readiness to get **involved** as part of an answer rather than simply moaning about the problem.
2. **Confidence** – a word meaning ‘with trust’ or maybe even ‘with faith’ – so that he was relying not upon himself but upon the One who had already saved him from the paws of lions and of bears.
3. Recognition that **modest gestures** – five little stones - can often make a greater difference in the long run than can those more grandiose, Goliath-like ones.
4. **Courage**, to take risks than to be reasonable. I wonder how risk averse you are. Our financial advisor looks at me with a Goliath like disdain about how risk averse I am to investing money. But we can't afford to be risk averse if we are pursuing the agenda of discipleship or mission.
5. And might there have been an element of **youthful naivete** at play here?—And are you like me sometimes feeling that I am too grown up for youthful naivete? And yet, how grateful I am for life shaping things I did four and five decades ago, with scarcely a thought for the implications, but which now I would be too cautious and rational to entertain, but which have made me what I am today.

Involvement – confidence – modesty – courage – naivete: are those five wee stones in our pouches as we face each day's agenda?

When I hear what Paul had to say to the Corinthians about being a Christian, I confess that my immediate reaction is to be intimidated. On the surface of it he can seem to be urging upon us a pretty punishing agenda for discipleship: ‘great endurance, ... afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech’. Now, of course that *is* a record of what Paul experienced, and his service to Jesus Christ is truly inspiring as a window onto Jesus' message and example. Actually, though, Paul's point here and everywhere else is surely not that living like that is the only way to please God. Rather, even as he is being honest about the cost of discipleship, he also emphasises God's promised grace to equip us for it. So a little later in II Corinthians he will reflect upon how God's grace is sufficient for all our needs.’³ In other words, Paul pursues his agenda in an echo of David, offering us a pattern of Christian living which is at once both demanding and confident of God's presence and power and peace. As we pursue any of our agenda, is it not the holding in tension of what God asks and offers that enables us to flourish, and the work to which God calls us thrive?

And so to Jesus's strategy in pursuit of *his* agenda. He has quite a task – to make God known, to usher in God's reign, and to embody God's love. No pressure there. And where do we find him in today's Gospel? Asleep in the boat. It is as if he is modelling for us how importantly we include rest and renewal in our lifestyle if we want to be effective in fulfilling the Christian agenda, not least in this era when that agenda is so urgently required and so willingly ignored.

Demonstrably this is a slightly bizarre narrative. What sort of fishermen, totally familiar with the Sea of Galilee as these were, would really have been thrown by one of the entirely characteristic squalls that frequently blow up from nowhere on that inland waterway surrounded by hills? Moreover, where is the credibility in having the woodworking landlubber on board as the one who is least anxious? This is a weird tale. It seems to be a story with a point that is little to do with meteorology and everything to do with ministry. What Jesus models here is that it's his presence

³ II Corinthians 12.9

that makes all the difference. He is, when everything else is said and done – and he says and does a lot, - he is neither more nor less than God with us, in the boat of life. That what people disturbed by demons found – being with them, he restored them. It's what families found as mothers in law lay dying – being with them, he healed them. It's what a person caught in adultery found, as opponents stoned them - being with them, he forgave them. It's what creation in its incompleteness finds – being with us, his arms stretched out on a cross to embrace it, Jesus rescues us. As Matthew writes of the very end of Jesus' ministry, the core of the message is this, 'I am with you always.'⁴

I have mentioned before the distinction that many writers make between Jesus being 'for us' and being 'with us'.⁵ And it's a distinction that I believe is really important as we pursue our personal agenda, and the church's, too. You see, it's entirely possible to be *for* something whilst being a great distance away; disconnect from it. I'm *for* the Uighur Muslims in China, the Rohingya fleeing Myanmar's Rakhine State, and the starving in Ethiopia's Tigray Province, but I am nowhere near enough for that being for them to make much of a difference - though it is true that my support of something like Christian Aid will surely help. It's the solidarity and impact of being *with* someone that's transformative. That incarnational ministry which puts skin on talk of God's love; that genuine accompanying which puts my feet in your moccasins;⁶ that Samaritan-like refusal to walk by on the other side;⁷ that acceptance that none of us is safe until all are safe; that none should revel in too much until all have enough. You see, I am haunted by the telling example I used a few months ago of feeding homeless people. It's one thing to cook for them; it's quite another to sit together at table and share the meal.

As we pursue each day's agenda, today's Bible characters all model for us how something of value: to fill our pouch with those five stones of involvement, confidence, modesty, courage and naivete; to put our trust in God's grace even more than in our own hard work; and to be 'with' as well as 'for' one another.

So may our agenda every day enable us to live to the glory of God, the blessing of the world and the deepening of our own joy. Amen

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20th June 2021

⁴ Matthew 28.20

⁵ Wells, Samuel 2015 *A Nazareth Manifesto: being with God* Chichester: Wiley Blackwell

⁶ *Judge softly* – a poem by Mary Torrains Lathrap 1838-95

⁷ Luke 10.25ff