



Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 4th August 2024

Readings: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

Sharing Together

One thing is clear about the public life of Jesus: he was always followed by crowds. This is clear from Gospels as different as Mark and John. Why do you suppose this was? There were no newspapers in those days, and certainly no social media: how did people know when he was likely to appear? We don't know.

What do you suppose the crowds were looking for? From our reading this morning Jesus seems to have taken a rather cynical view of their motives. He doesn't even seem to think that they were looking for signs and wonders, such as miracles of healing. He suggests they were simply looking for free food. (This was just after Jesus had fed 5,000 people from five barley loaves and two fish, with twelve baskets of fragments left over.)

Ten to twenty years ago, we as a family often used to go on holiday in the Lake District. The route we followed was north on the Great North Road as far as Scotch Corner, and then across the A66 to Penrith and then to Keswick to stay at a hotel in Borrowdale. It is a good route, which was steadily improved during the time we used it. But in late July there was one snag – the Appleby Horse Fair - so much so that I always noted the dates in my diary. For two or three days before and after the Fair the roads converging on Appleby, the old county town of Westmorland, were full of horse-drawn caravans coming from every direction. It's difficult enough to overtake a motor-drawn caravan; but a horse-drawn caravan is much worse. I think that perhaps the crowds that went out to see Jesus may have been like that; or the crowds converging on Glastonbury for the folk-festival there, or the Grand Prix at Silverstone.

Jesus said a rather strange thing to the crowds: he said that he was the bread that came down from heaven, the bread of life. He was recalling the time when the people of Israel on their way from Egypt through the wilderness were complaining that Moses and Aaron, their leaders, had brought them on a false trail, without any food or water. This was when God sent manna overnight every day, but only enough for one day at a time – except on Fridays, when they had extra to see them through the Sabbath.

Now the Gospel reading is from chapter 6 of John's Gospel for the whole of August and into September, so I am sure you will hear more of this story later in the month. Make sure you don't forget it; you may be able to read it at home.

Sermon

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

'You are the man!'

The lectionary readings today offer us a series of possible topics for reflection, but without any common theme seeming to emerge from any of them. Margaret and I have been on holiday this last week in North Yorkshire, though I obviously wrote all the necessary material before we went away. But the world does not stop, simply because one is on holiday; so I obviously had to make some revisions for today.

One of the things that did not stop this week was sin. It took various forms: most obviously and most mysteriously, the seventeen-year-old boy in Southport, now charged with the murder of three little girls and attempted murder of ten others; further assassinations, claimed or alleged, by the Israeli Defence Forces on their enemies in the Middle East, in what is becoming (if it is not already) the most destructive piece of military retaliation in modern history, publicly supported and even justified so far by the new UK Prime Minister as well as his predecessor; the continuation of the generally forgotten civil war in Sudan; the continuation of war following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, supported and

justified by Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church; and so on, and so on. This, of course, is not to mention the riots in various towns in the North of England. When one is staying in Richmond, Hartlepool seems much closer.

By comparison King David's sin seems almost domestic. I have never found David an easy character, partly, I suppose, because my name is David. From very early in my life I have known why I was given the name I was; and it is nothing to do with the Old Testament character. But I do find the contrast between the different pictures given of David in the Old Testament rather extreme. God does certainly seem to choose some rather odd characters to carry out his will, which should give us hope that no-one is beyond redemption; but I do wish some of them would try a little harder.

There's the handsome young shepherd, whom his father did not think it even worth presenting to Samuel, when he came looking for a successor to Saul, the first king of Israel. (But Samuel always saw the Israelite desire for a king as a personal rejection of himself and so became a hero for all republicans.) Then there is the young warrior who was weighed down by Saul's armour when sent to fight Goliath and threw it off to kill the giant with a shepherd's sling and stone. And finally we have the king who seemed destined to spend the rest of his life fighting the Philistines when, that is, he wasn't fighting his various sons who all wanted the throne. There's clearly a downside in having too many wives.

But even then David was not satisfied. In many ways the story of David and Bathsheba is a classic pornographic tale. David has fallen out with Michal, Saul's daughter, who was his first wife, because she told him off for exposing himself by dancing before the ark of the covenant. We are told she was cursed with barrenness by God for speaking against the Lord's anointed. Then David happened to see Bathsheba bathing from his rooftop; so he sent for her and committed adultery with her. Subsequently David arranged for Uriah, her husband to be killed in battle so he could marry her. This was the crime which Nathan condemned David for, by telling him a story about a rich man who robbed a poor man of his lamb, so that he could use that lamb to entertain a wayfarer, because he did not want to kill one of his own lambs.

When David's anger was kindled against the man, and he asked who he was, we have what must be one of the most dramatic scenes of public exposure in all literature, culminating in Nathan's simple and stinging words to the king, 'You are the man'. We live in an age when there is often a lot of rather glib talk about 'speaking truth to power'. But we often under-estimate the courage that is required from a true prophet. Nathan could have had no idea of how the king would react. It could have ended in his sudden death – pronto. More or less every week I read a story (or several) about individuals who are rounded up by authoritarian regimes and imprisoned either without trial or only what we would regard as a 'show trial', with the verdict decided before the trial even begins.

But then David is portrayed as the model of repentance. Indeed the heading of Psalm 51 almost uniquely describes it as the expression of that repentance. I say 'almost uniquely' because although many of the psalms have titles, few are so specifically related to one incident. Do we find this convincing?

I have never been sure. The psalm has certainly inspired some beautiful music over the centuries. But the story, which extends over several chapters, seems to show that David does not learn from his mistakes; and we are never given any indication of what Bathsheba thought of all this, reminding us of the essentially patriarchal background to the Old Testament. We are, however, told that she did make a last-minute intervention to ensure that Solomon secured the succession; and of course it was Solomon rather than David who built the new Temple in Jerusalem. So much for David; but I found it impossible to pass over him without a mention

The reading from John's Gospel seems to be primarily concerned, as in so much of that Gospel, with seeing who Jesus really is. This is one of those situations where we need to take the longer view, rather than reading the Bible in short chunks. Do we see Scripture as a series of short stories, or is a longer story being told? Treating the Gospel as a collection of episodes makes some sense, but it isn't generally how we read books. John repeatedly presses the question of how we can understand the significance of Jesus other than by seeing God at work in and through him. If we do this, then, as these few verses demonstrate, we shall see our need for food and drink satisfied; we shall see our need

for healing satisfied; and we shall have access to eternal life – a different kind of life, not just life that lasts for ever, which I think might turn out to be rather boring

These are not just gifts from God to enjoy on our own. They depend on being part of a community in which we all have our own part to play. This is not just some kind of charitable ‘add on’ to personal salvation; it’s not even clear that it relates easily to personal salvation at all. Rather, the picture painted in Ephesians 4, as in other letters by Paul, is one in which community comes first.

You see this very starkly in the current United States Election campaign: one party’s vision seems to be based on seeing society as a collection of little bits with the option to come together for certain objectives. But that is essentially ‘optional’; in other words, you choose what you want to do and that discharges your responsibilities, because in the end it’s your choice. The other vision seems to be that the community is the given, opting out is not possible, and the question is whether we recognise that we belong together; if we do, we cannot simply put ourselves first.

That is what I hate most about all this flag-waving, whether it’s at political leaders’ press conferences, which depressingly seems to have become more common in the last ten years; or even the Last Night of the Proms. I remember once we were staying with friends in Toronto, and we were taken to a reproduction of the Last Night, and I was depressed beyond measure by being given little flags to wave. Nor (though this may be unpopular just now) am I really impressed by long parades of sports competitors carrying all the flags you can imagine.

I believe Holy Communion, the memorial of death and resurrection, shows us a better way – the way which Jesus lived and embodied for us.

DMT, 4th August 2024