

Sermon for Hinde Street Methodist Church  
Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> June 2015 11am

Old Testament: 1 Samuel 17.32-49

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 6.1-13

Gospel Reading: Mark 4.35-41

I've struggled with today's readings. Not just because I'm not comfortable with God taking sides in battles, because the connections between the readings seemed tenuous, but also because their usual interpretations, only make sense to people of faith. And that bothers me because it supports those who think faith is at best, a harmless distraction for gullible people, and at worst, a dangerous delusion that harms the innocent and vulnerable. Nor did I want to simply offer the comforting noises some of the commentaries give. Their suggestion that if we stand with God, if we trust, and do not doubt, God will save us from being engulfed by the giants of sickness, family breakups, financial disaster, addictions, and shame, just as God protected David and Jesus saved for the disciples. It's not that they're not true. It's rather that this reinforces an image of God who rescues individual Christians, doesn't have much to say to those who aren't rescued or saved, and ignores many of the gross injustices being perpetrated in today's world. It's just too small an image of God. While I was struggling with all this, the appalling events in Charleston unfolded, and I've wondered how to reflect on these events as well. I knew I couldn't say nothing, but they've taken me in a direction that is different from the one I'd intended, so this sermon still feels like a work in progress!

Tales like the story of David and Goliath, are popular in every time and place. We love the triumph of the underdog against the odds. Remember how Susan Boyle's story captured the imagination of people all around the world. Yet even as we enjoy these underdog stories, our scientific minds are also looking for alternative, more realistic explanations. And there is one for this. When I was first told about my pituitary tumour, the doctor unhelpfully told me that Goliath probably had one too. Pituitary tumours can lead to the condition popularly called giant-ism. And in some people, the tumour presses on the optic nerve, and limits their sight. He suggested Goliath couldn't see David because he was out of his vision. A similar suggestion is made in a book by Malcom Gladwell. Does it help? Well it depends how we read the story. If we need to believe it's historically accurate these new insights present us with problems. If we read it as a theological statement about God and humanity it'll matter less.

The Philistines were a mercenary army who caused chaos across the Middle East and Northern Africa in the Late Bronze Age. Goliath was reputed to be their largest, strongest, fiercest and most experienced warrior. In comparison, David could hardly move when he was dressed up in armour, had no training and his only weapon was a sling and stones. When Saul protests that David will not be a match for the giant, David's answer, sounds arrogant. He was used to protecting the flock against wild animals and believed that just as God had saved him from the wild animals God would save him from Goliath. All communities need heroes. So the story has been written in a way that reinforces David's contribution to the victory, but if it's to make sense to us now, we need to consider the purpose of the story.

This is the moment when it becomes clear to Israel that David – who is first and foremost shepherd – is worthy to become their next king. Not just because he defeats

Goliath, but because God had chosen him to implement God's justice. For the God of the Israelites *"is unalterably opposed to all who prey on human happiness and well-being."* Goliath was not defeated because David was stronger and cleverer than him, but because God is stronger and cleverer, than Goliath and David. God's justice is such that God is committed to defending faithful people and those who cannot defend themselves. Walter Bruggemann, an Old Testament scholar, says. *"The death of Goliath signals that Israel's new king, this shepherd like no others, will defend his people against their oppressors. But more... it reaffirms that the God of Israel will never permit injustice to prevail."* (i)

I want to reread this last sentence in the light of events in Charleston. The *"God of Israel will never permit injustice to prevail."* *"...permit injustice to prevail."* It doesn't say God will never let injustice happen. And it definitely doesn't say God will never let bad things happen to people of faith. Bad things happen to good people all the time. And although some churches teach that they do not happen to righteous, God-fearing people, this has only ever been only part of the biblical witness. And its greatest problem - and it's a tendency that'd been present throughout the history of Jews and Christians - is that it leads people to the conclusion that when bad things happen people are being punished. So I want to say that the God we meet in Jesus, does not punish us by sending illness, natural disasters or violent murderers, and nor does this God reward us for faith by ensuring our prosperity or safety. I am sure that the failures of nature including illness are not the result of human sin, but the shooting in Charleston along other similar events, is. For when sin has its way, whether it's in the lives of individuals, communities or nations, or globally, people get hurt. I was going to say innocent people get hurt. But few adults are innocent. We're enmeshed in the injustice that corrupts God's world, and find it hard to challenge it, because we've been convinced (unwittingly or otherwise) that our lives depend on the world working as it does. So it's not surprising that as Pope Francis has pointed this out that we are captives to sin *n his* encyclical on climate change this week, he's roused a vitriolic response from Catholic republicans, who benefit from the status quo. But he is inviting people of faith to believe that *"God... will never permit injustice to prevail."* For while we all sin. We can also choose to share in freeing the oppressed from their oppressors - which includes the earth from humanity - as David did.

Today's Gospel story is a story that embarrasses many Christians. We're not sure what to do with Jesus who stilled the storm. For not only, does it demand we believe that God messes around with the laws of nature to save faithful people, it forces us to face the question of why a God who loves doesn't hear everyone who calls out in peril on the sea. So, we prefer metaphorical interpretations affirming God's love and presence care in the storms of life, for those who have faith. Yet because people don't always experience God's presence in the storm, and it's what some in Charleston will have said over the past few days, we need to look beyond this interpretation.

This is the first story Mark tells of a storm on the Sea of Galilee. It's the beginning of a new section that contains four extraordinary stories: the calming of the storm, the healings of a possessed man and a woman who'd been ill for 12 years, and the raising of Jairus' daughter. Mark's intention is that through these stories we get a glimpse of that it means for the kingdom of God to come near. And it begins in today's Gospel. While Jesus and the disciples are crossing to the other side of the lake a storm blows up. This wasn't unusual. Storms blow up and out quite quickly on the Sea of Galilee. But Mark isn't

bothered about the meteorological conditions, and even 'though we may want to understand the cause of the storm or even whether or not it really happened, these needn't matter too much to us either. For Mark isn't seeking historical or scientific accuracy. He wants his readers to recall similar incidents in the psalms, in Jonah's story, and in the story of Exodus. For the meaning of this sea calming, depends on us understanding that the sea is the place of chaos and demonic forces, and that it is God who delivers people from its grip.

One of my commentaries says that *"several details in the narrative seem out of place. When Jesus calms the storm, he speaks to the wind as though to a demon, leading some interpreters to describe this story as an exorcism... Just as the sea monster in ancient mythology represents the powers of evil, so also the raging storm here reflects all the powers of chaos and evil. Jesus' exorcisms are evidence that he is the stronger one"*, that he was able to bind the "strong man", to *"break up Satan's kingdom"*<sup>iii</sup> that was present in many forms. In Jesus' time, people believed that illness, untimely death, and the chaos unleashed by nature, as well as the foreign armies occupying their God-given land, resulted from demonic forces. Given this Mark is making a huge claim for Jesus. That he alone among the many miracle workers, healers and exorcists who plied their trade in the towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee, could still the raging storm. Jesus wasn't simply a miracle worker. He was transforming the world by exorcising it of demonic forces.

I suspect I'm treading on touchy ground right now. Many of you will not be comfortable with the idea that there are demonic forces in today's world that need exorcising. Or the world-view that believes there is a cosmic battle between good and evil. I'm not either. But if we translate this into contemporary language, and talk about discrimination including racism, violence and gun crime, poverty, the destruction of the environment, wars and so on. We find ourselves talking about human sin, and then, this prayer used by contemporary exorcists sounds less out of place. *"In the name of Christ, come out of darkness into light, help us to understand you, that we may know your name and nature, striving with you in the love of God, so that you may come to yield your energy in the service of all that is holy."*<sup>iii</sup> As I've listened to stories of the shooting in Charleston this week, I've been struck by the way their murderer was welcomed into their bible study group, and how their relatives spoke in court on Friday. Members of this church did not look at this young man with suspicion. They'd embraced a brother made in God's image. And I don't think that can be taken for granted, given that many will have experienced exclusion and oppression by white people, including white Christians. But the African-American church has a history of forgiveness. And the ability to forgive has emerged as an act of mercy as well as a tool against oppression. So even though we're surprised, their response has grown out of years of practice, in the face of sin. This isn't exorcism. Yet the refusal to return evil with evil, the willingness to act in ways that unite rather than separate, and the desire to seek reconciliation, has the same effect. And over time, the actions of those who choose to act differently, expel the forces of evil and darkness, and can even transform those they've included in. They witness to a conviction that God doesn't *"permit injustice to prevail."* And 'though it is a witness that is strange to the world, it also speaks volumes, to it.

This is what Paul is claiming in his letter to the Christians in Corinth. God's saving work - the work David shares and that Jesus will invite his disciples to share too - isn't the result of magic, or God disrupting nature's laws, but of human beings being transformed into the likeness of God. And that's why those who are a new creation, changed people, practice

inclusion, reconciliation and forgiveness, and seek unity in their lives and relationships. Today's passage comes immediately after Paul says that just as God was reconciling the world to God's-self, through Christ's life, death and resurrection, those who follow him should be reconciled to each other. And today's reading begins with his assertion that the spirit of reconciliation should be seen in the Christian community and its members. Their lives – lives that include "...afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger..." for it is often through suffering or hardship that people change - will witness to others whether or not the divine grace has taken root or is in vain. Paul's opponents, who want charismatic and powerful leaders, won't understand this. And even less the series of paradoxes that follows. "*We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*" Paul often speaks of the cross, but he rarely speaks of Jesus' suffering, rather the suffering of those who follow him. Because he uses himself as an example, he can sound arrogant, yet he speaks from the experience of having his life turned upside down and transformed - through God's love for him - in the way that we all have the potential to be.

I began by saying that I was wary of interpretations of today's readings that only make sense to people of faith. For that suggests God's interests are small. Yet the story of David and Goliath speaks of a God who is "*is unalterably opposed to all who prey on human happiness and well-being*", and "*will never permit injustice to prevail.*" And the story of Jesus stilling a storm on the Sea of Galilee, insists that God's concern extend to transforming the world, by exorcising demonic forces. These would remain wonderful stories 'though, if it wasn't for Paul's assertion that human beings are God's saving work, demands a corresponding human transformation. As we are reconciled to God, and to each other, we are re-made in God's image. And it is that image that witnesses, as the Christians in Charleston have done this week and as Pope Francis has done in his encyclical, that faith is not irrelevant. That it is not only concerned with itself. That people of faith, whose lives are patterned on Christ's, have the potential to transform the world. This is how the hymn we sang by WH Vanstone put it. "*Love that gives, gives evermore, gives with zeal, with eager hands, spares not, keeps not, all outpours, ventures all, its all expends. Drained in love in making full; bound in setting others free; poor in making many rich; weak in giving power to be. Therefore he who thee reveals, hangs... helpless... tells of what they love must be.*" Later, as prepare for communion, we will sing these Charles Wesley's words. *It's here that we hope your image to find.*" In bread and wine, broken and poured out, is the world-and-life-changing symbol of God's love for us. A symbol, shared by Christians all over the world today that will change the world, if only we would bind ourselves to God and God's ways. Amen.

Sue Keegan von Allmen  
21<sup>st</sup> June 2015

---

<sup>i</sup> *Texts for Preaching Year B* by Bruggemann, Coustar, Gavena and Newsome (Westminster / John Knox Press) 1993, 393-4

<sup>ii</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol VIII* (Abingdon Press, Nashville) 1995, 580-1

---

<sup>iii</sup> *Healing - more or less* by Jim Cotter (Sheffield, Cairns Publications) 1990, 13.