

Hinder Street Methodist Church

Sunday 26th July 2015 11am

Val Reid

2 Samuel 11: 1-15

Ephesians 3: 14-21

John 6: 1-21

Once upon a time there was a poor fisherman.
He lived in a filthy shack with his wife.
One day he sat by the sea fishing, and he caught a flounder.
As he went to take it off the hook, the flounder said, 'I'm an enchanted prince.
Please don't kill me.
Please let me go.
Please put me back in the water.'

The fisherman was a kind-hearted man, and he did as he was asked.
At the end of the day he went home to his wife with nothing to eat.
'Didn't you catch anything today?' she asked.
He told her about the flounder.
'You stupid man,' she said, 'it was clearly a magic flounder. Why didn't you ask it for something?
Go back there now and ask for your wish to come true.'
'But what do I wish for?' the fisherman asked.
'I hate living in this pigsty,' said his wife.
'I'd like a nice, neat, clean cottage.'

So the fisherman did as he was told, and went back to the beach.
He called the flounder.
He asked politely for a nice, neat, clean cottage for his wife.

His wish was granted, and when he got home, there was his wife, smiling all over her face, sitting in a lovely cottage, with a well-ordered little vegetable garden, and upstairs a proper feather bed.

But in this fairy tale from the Brothers Grimm, they didn't live happily ever after. After a few weeks the wife became dissatisfied.

Why is it always the wife's fault in fairy tales?

She sent the fisherman back to the flounder.

The cottage wasn't good enough.

She wanted a mansion.

And she got a mansion.

And so it went on.

The palace wasn't good enough – she wanted to be king.

She wanted to live in a palace.

And soon, being King wasn't good enough – she wanted to be Emperor.

Being Emperor wasn't good enough – she wanted to be Pope.

Being Pope wasn't good enough – she wanted to be God.

And at that moment, the flounder gets fed up with her insatiable demands.

Everything goes back to how it was at the beginning.

No glass floor for this family.

They're back to the filthy shack.

The sea shore.

Wondering where their next meal will come from.

I do sometimes wonder about the ethics of these Grimm folk tales!

Sometimes the lazy, handsome youngest son finds a magic something, makes a wish, and all his dreams come true.

But not in this story.

In this story, the moral is clear.

Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

In today's lectionary reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, we are introduced to a side of King David we have not seen before.

All through the summer, we have heard the stories of the first attempts of the people of Israel to establish a monarchy.

We began in the first book of Samuel, when the elders demanded a king, like other nations.

The prophet Samuel warned them of the dangers of a king.

Giving away power is a risk.

Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

He will take what he wants from you, the people.

Your sons to fight in his army and harvest his crops.

Your daughters to work in the palace.

The best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves.

But the people are determined to have a king.

A king to fight their battles for them.

The first king, Saul, doesn't work out.

But it all begins so well for David, their second king.

Like the best kind of folk tale, he is the unlikely youngest son.

He kills the invincible Philistine champion, Goliath, with a stone from his sling.

He goes on to win famous victories in battle.

But at the start of today's story, the writers make it clear that all is not well.

In the Spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah.

But David remained at Jerusalem.

Now if you are a pacifist, you may think that remaining in Jerusalem while the fighting is happening elsewhere is a praiseworthy thing to do.

But in a culture where to fight is to survive, and in a nation where the whole point of having a king was to have someone to fight your battles for you, this is clearly a dereliction of duty.

Whether David feels guilty, or frustrated, or bored, we don't know.

But we are invited to watch while he acts out Samuel's worst fears.

He sees a beautiful woman.
He is king.
He has the power to have whatever he wants.
So he has her.
It is as brutal as that.

While his army is acting out might is right on the battlefield, he is doing the same at home.
Just because he can.

It is interesting that over the centuries there have been attempts to justify David's behaviour – from ancient rabbis to contemporary commentators, from novelists to artists to film-makers.
And the justification often takes the form of that common defence in cases of rape – she was asking for it.
Why was Bathsheba bathing on the roof in full view of the palace?
She must have been intending to seduce him.
Deliberately targeting that most tempting of all catches, the king.
No wonder Thomas Hardy's flirty heroine is called Bathsheba.

But there is no hint of that in our story.
Bathsheba is engaging in the ritual washing that the law prescribed at the end of her period.
And the roof was the normal place for personal and household washing in a hot climate.

No – the writer is clear.
David abuses his royal power to get what he wants.
Without thought for the consequences.
And then he comes up against the edges of what power can do – and what it cannot do.
He can command his servants to get the woman he wants.
He can coerce her into sleeping with him – he is the king after all.
He can send her home again.

But he can't control nature – Bathsheba gets pregnant.

And he can't control the principled behaviour of her husband Uriah, who refuses to be manipulated by David.

Refuses to go home and eat in comfort and sleep with his wife, while the rest of the army are out in the field.

And he can't control God.

In the very last verse of chapter 11, we hear that the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.

David is the greatest king the people of Israel will ever have.

His reign is the golden age for his people.

When the longed-for Messiah comes, he will be great David's greater son.

Yet at the heart of David's reign is this appalling abuse of power.

Which the writer makes no attempt to excuse or explain or justify or mitigate.

Why?

When you think about it, it's extraordinarily courageous – or foolhardy – to include this story in the scriptural account of David's reign.

Like many warts-and-all biographies – what are we to learn from it?

Pixar's new film, *Inside Out*, was released here this weekend.

It tells the story of the characters who inhabit 12-year-old Riley's mind – Joy, Anger, Sadness, Fear.

I think this ancient story brings to life one of the characters who inhabits our psyche. We all have an inner King David – an inner Fisherman's wife – who, given the chance, would take and take and take.

Now you may be thinking, 'No. This isn't me. I'm not someone who abuses power. I'm not someone who just takes what they want regardless of the consequences. I have a conscience. I'm basically a good person.'

Of course.

We are all basically good people.

Why else would we be in church on a sunny Sunday morning in Summer?

But it's not that simple.

We may not have the opportunity to abuse such power as we have in a spectacular way like King David, or like the fisherman's wife.

But I want to invite you to approach this from another angle.

To think about the way we use our power to control – ourselves, our environment, our world.

I've been reading a book called 'The master and his emissary – the divided brain and the making of the western world.'

Ian McGilchrist, the author, demonstrates that the two halves of our brains have different functions.

The right brain sees things as a whole, in all their subtle, complicated context.

It sees connections and relationships.

It is in touch with feelings, emotions, imagination.

It intuits the numinous, the stuff that can't be articulated with words, or proved with science.

The left brain likes to analyse.

It likes to explain and justify and categorise and prove.

It likes to pin things down with statistics and evidence.

It likes to manage the unpredictable phenomena of life with process and bureaucracy.

It likes to control.

In the normal run of things, McGilchrist says, the right brain does the preliminary scoping of anything it encounters in the real world.

It gets a sense of where it belongs in the grand scheme of things.

It reflects on what it feels like, where it fits into its environment, what it means.

Then it hands it over to the left brain to examine it in detail.

To observe it objectively.

To slot it into a familiar category.

To rationalise it.

Then the left brain should hand it back to the right brain to bring all this together into a complex, nuanced whole.

But, he argues, our society has become more and more a prisoner of our left brain approach to life.

We have downgraded the right brain, with what we think of as its wishy-washy, touchy-feely approach to life.

If it's not accessible to reason, science, the left brain's analytical framework, then it has no meaning.

No validity.

This may seem a long way from a story of adultery and murder three thousand years ago.

But David acted out of a belief that he could control life.

People, events, life and death, God's approval.

And he found that he could not.

I wonder how far our approach to life is governed by our super-rational left brain?

Our longing to manipulate and control things.

We are not bad people.

Not really.

But a huge number of us voted for this government.

Not because we want to see 330,000 children from low-income families worse off because of the benefit cap.

But because we believe welfare spending must be controlled.

Not because we want thousands of migrants to drown in the Mediterranean.

But because we believe that immigration must be managed.

Not because we want the people of Greece to suffer.

But because we believe that debts must be repaid in an orderly fashion.

We have a vast amount of power, as individuals and as a society.

Power we use to manage and control others.

And indeed to manage and control our own lives.

What we see in today's gospel reading is an antidote to power.

An alternative to the left brain's need to manage and control.

After the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, the people want to take Jesus by force and make him king.

Who would not want to manage and control that sort of power?

But Jesus resists.

He withdraws again to the mountain by himself.
That is not what he has come to demonstrate.
That is not the kind of power that he embodies.

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle that appears in all four of the gospels.

It is so significant that Matthew and Mark tell the story twice.
But it is not a story about magical manipulation.
It is not the New Testament equivalent of the Brothers Grimm.

This second section of John's gospel begins with a story of miraculous feeding, just as the first section begins with the miracle at Cana.

It is no accident that these two miracles are about bread and wine, the sacramental signs of the presence of God's grace.

Nor is it an accident that John – like Matthew and Mark – links the feeding of the five thousand with the calming of the storm.

Jesus meets our deepest needs.

For sustenance, and for safety.

But this meeting of need, this embodied grace, is as far as it is possible to be from the power that wants to manage and control.

Philip and Andrew represent the analytical left brain.

Jesus asks them: *Where are we to buy food for these people to eat?*

They have no idea.

Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.

There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.

But what are they among so many people?

It's irrational.

It's impossible.

But Jesus took the real, ordinary stuff that was there – one boy's picnic lunch – and transformed it into a meal for thousands.

We have no idea of the mechanism.

That is not the point.

That's our left brain wanting to explain and analyse and clarify.

But this isn't left brain stuff.

This is God acting in a way that is beyond our understanding.

When the disciples, trapped on a boat in a storm, are terrified by the figure walking towards them on the water, he responds by saying *It is I; do not be afraid.*

This is a mis-translation.

What he says in the Greek is *ego eimi.*

I am. Do not be afraid.

Not 'It's me'.

But *I am.*

The divine name.

Do not be afraid.

The words of Yahweh through Isaiah to the people in exile.

A promise of rescue.

Of homecoming.

What God is offering in Jesus is not power which can be explained, or manipulated, or harnessed, or controlled.

God is offering Godself.

And if we are to accept this gift of Godself, we have to step outside our usual categories of power and its uses.

We have to let go of the urge to have and manage and control.

We have to let go of our clinging ego that wants more and more and more – because only that way can we be sure that we've got life under control.

We have to recognise the limitations of our demanding left brain, that thinks there is no truth outside its scientific rationalisation.

We have to take the risk of trusting God.

Trusting Love.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.