

*Trinity 2 2010*

For what is David remembered?

He is remembered for killing Goliath; as a great King, a good and powerful leader with a reputation for being just. He is also remembered as a musician, and for the Psalms. He probably didn't write many of the psalms that are attributed to him, but it is in recognition of his greatness as poet and musician that they are always called the psalms of David.

Not bad for a shepherd boy made good.

But today's reading shows another side of him.

King David had fine clothes, fine food, the best musicians, and army that was disciplined and for the most part victorious. And women, no shortage of women.

And so it was until the fateful campaign against Ammon. David stayed in Jerusalem, leaving the battle in the capable hands of Joab and his other generals. And David looked out from his window and saw this amazingly beautiful woman washing. And this man, who had become used to having anything he wanted, wanted her.

He knew who she was, that she was already married to Uriah the Hittite who was a soldier away fighting at the front. But his desire overpowered all other considerations.

He sent for her, and they slept together, it would be very hard for a woman to refuse a royal command. And then Bathsheba, for that was her name, found that she was expecting a child.

She sent a message to King David.

David was not a cruel man. He knew that the punishment for a woman found to have been adulterous was death. David's prime concern was not to be found out, but perhaps largely for Bathsheba's benefit. But there was a serious problem, Uriah was still away and he wasn't expected back for months. David had a cunning plan. He called Uriah back from the Battle on a pretext and hoped that he would use the opportunity to spend a night at home with his wife. But at that time a soldier believed that what he did was for God, and that he had a sacred duty while engaged in battle to refrain from sex. So Uriah wouldn't go home, he just slept at the King's gate. Uriah was too honourable to do what he considered as cheating. So then David sent a message to Joab, his right-hand man, to ask that Uriah be put in the most dangerous position in the battle and to ensure that he got killed. In attempting to save Bathsheba, he was prepared to sacrifice Uriah.

And Joab obeyed, and Uriah was indeed killed in battle, and Bathsheba mourned.

In those days, the period of mourning was very short, and so David was able to marry her as soon as it was over, well before her child was born.

It is a tragic story, and the real tragedy is that David deceived himself.

He had many wives. There was nothing to stop him taking more. It was accepted. Sex was not frowned upon – far from it. But David failed to see that it was wrong to take another man's wife, and wrong to ensure that man's death.

When Nathan comes and tells him the story of the rich man taking the poor man's sole lamb which was like a pet to him, David is outraged at the cruelty. This isn't a sham. He really is outraged. David is a man of honour. And when Nathan tells him that this man is him, that this is precisely what he has done in talking Bathsheba from Uriah, he is overcome with remorse.

He admits 'I have sinned against the Lord.'

If ever there was a story for our time it is this one.

Who is the rich man?

I am. And you are.

In fact, even if you earn the minimum wage, you are rich. There are many richer, that is true, but we are all rich.

And we have got used to being able to have what we want.

And the moral boundaries are no longer clear. We are encouraged to covet, to be greedy. That's what nine tenths of adverts are about.

So the same people who are outraged about lack of funds for the health service, may try to get away with earning some money on the side so that they don't have to pay tax. Let them take money from others not me, might be their cry, but it is never put into words like that.

Good people who would never knowingly hurt a child, want to have carnations in winter, and though they may know that these are grown in huge greenhouses in South America in an atmosphere so laden with pesticides that it causes the children who work there to die young, they still buy them because they want them and they have the money to pay for them. So why not. If I don't someone else will, is the argument.

Good people, responsible people, can't resist that extra drink even though they know that they are driving home and that they are putting other people's lives at risk.

And husbands or wives fall in love with someone else, and feel that being in love excuses anything, even the break up of a marriage.

It is as if we are unprepared to say that anything is out of bounds. If you can get it, without getting into trouble, then it must be O.K.

And that is exactly how David felt until Nathan pointed out what his behaviour was really like.

Without Nathan, what would David's next move have been? As it was he had enough problems, many of his children died and the remainder were well outside of his control. But David had been brought up sharp, he had returned to God. He continued to make mistakes, but after this he knew where the boundaries were.

Nathan was essential to the great king. And my goodness he was brave in challenging King David in this way.

Well perhaps it is time for us to be brave. To challenge the accepted place of greed and envy on our society. And to see the way in which we ourselves contribute to this culture.

It is notable that the early Christians held a common purse. They pooled their resources. There was no place at all for greed in that society. This was how those that had known Jesus, had lived and worked with him, interpreted his teaching.

We have moved a long way since then. Greed has been elevated until if you read magazines you might be forgiven for believing that it was a virtue.

But it isn't. It is a deadly sin. Deadly because it destroys relationships, it destroys lives, it destroys society and, if the church doesn't challenge it, it will also destroy the church.

The boundaries must be rebuilt lest we become like King David, taking what we want, covering our tracks so that we aren't found out, but tut tutting when others do the same.

David, when he repented, suffered, he was punished. Had he not repented, perhaps he would now be remembered not for his justness and mercy, for his skill as poet and musician, but as a cruel ruthless man. Through Christ, we have the opportunity for immediate forgiveness if we will admit our failing to God. Jesus welcomed prostitutes, crooks, people who had made a complete mess of their lives. He forgave them. And his teaching provided the framework, the boundaries, so that they could live lives of generosity, love and joy. Through Christ all people can live lives of generosity, love and joy if they turn away from their past and towards him. May we hear the words of Nathan spoken to ourselves, and be the voice of Nathan to the world. And then, when we die, may we be remembered not for our failings, but for the good things we have done. Amen.

Mary Bide