

King David

Series (Parts 1 to 3). Holy Trinity Twickenham, June 2008.

Part 1: David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17:38-50)

So many people struggle to bring together a faith they learned in early childhood with the complex and sometimes messy realities of their adult lives. So many of us know stories like David and Goliath. But we probably don't feel they apply to our lives today. We probably feel we've outgrown the faith of the nursery. But the challenge is to rediscover the power of these biblical stories afresh, as adults (because these were actually stories written about adults, for adults).

A little bit about David. He was born about a thousand years before Jesus. He was the 8th, and youngest, son of a man called Jesse, from Bethlehem. He looked after the family's sheep. He had red hair and was considered handsome. He was also a gifted musician. Eventually, he's made king of Israel. In fact, he's only the second king Israel ever had, and he's still considered the greatest of Israel's kings.

He's also the one character in the Bible we know the most about. There's more material about David than any other person. And he's somebody we can relate to. One of the reasons is that at no point does David ever meet directly with God, or have a supernatural vision, or see a great miracle. David's called to a life of faith in a God he never sees or hears from directly.

Also, David is recognisably human. He keeps getting things wrong, messing things up. He's not some plaster saint or holy guru. He lives among the politics and temptations and compromise of the real world. What lots of people don't realize is that characters in the Bible aren't usually heroes or role-models. Instead, you get gritty, honest portraits of real people and their failings, in real-world situations.

So what about this famous story so many of us know from the nursery: the fight with Goliath? What does it say about David, and what does it say to us today?

As a young man, David divides his time between looking after his father's sheep and visiting the court of King Saul, where he works as a musician. The king has fits of depression – in fact, quite serious mental illness, and David's music seems to be the only thing that helps. This goes on till the King goes to war with the Philistines. At that stage, David's only in his mid-teens, and three of his brothers go off to fight in the king's army.

During the war, a Philistine warrior called Goliath challenges the Israelite army. Goliath wasn't a 'giant' like the giant in Jack and the Beanstalk! He was just a big guy, who stood head and shoulders above everybody else.

And David sees this bruiser walking up and down, taunting the Israelites and challenging one of them to single combat. The idea is that the winner's side will then win the whole war. David's simply on the front-line taking food and provisions to his brothers, who're in the king's army. But he takes up the challenge.

David persuades Saul that he can deal with Goliath, despite his youth, because he's had experience fighting off wild animals. And he persuades him that God's on his side and will give him victory. So Saul says yes, and gives him his armour to wear. But David finds he's so weighed down by the armour that he can't move. So he takes it off, and just uses his sling with stones from a nearby stream.

David approaches Goliath, and says, 'You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty', and he slings a stone which hits Goliath on the forehead and he dies. So the battle's won, not with mighty armies and armour, but with skill and trust in God.

Nice story for children. But does it say anything to you and me? Well, one of the things the story of David and Goliath says to us is about our perspective on life.

1) Perspective: Human wisdom is shown to be faulty, because it doesn't take into account the full picture. In normal perspective, Goliath's impressive and frightening. And David's insignificant. Most of the time he's out looking after sheep. On the 'Goliath day', he's not there as a warrior. He's bringing bread and cheese to his brothers.

The same attitude that sees Goliath as impressive, and David as a nobody, believes David will only stand a chance if he's loaded down with the best armour and equipped with the best sword. It's the attitude that says: 'Fight power with power, aggression with the same type of aggression.'

And yet, from God's perspective, things look different. This shepherd boy carrying bread and cheese is going to be a king. He's passionate in his faith and skilled enough to run the nation. He's canny enough to beat Goliath, not by becoming a Goliath himself, but by trusting God and having a fresh perspective that the Goliaths of the world could never imagine.

David lives in a world where he focusses on the bigness of God. Think about David's life up to this point. He's been out keeping sheep. He's spent lots of time alone in the presence of the God who created the universe. So compared to that kind of greatness, a Goliath doesn't loom so large. So David's the only one who can challenge the terror the Israelites feel when they're confronted by Goliath. Because he's the only one who's spent enough time with a God who's bigger.

One writer, Eugene Peterson, says this: 'The only person fully in touch with reality that day was David.' Why? Because the biggest reality is God's reality. And to see things from that perspective, you've got to know God, spend time with God, learn to see things from his perspective. David has what Eugene Peterson calls 'a prayer-saturated imagination'. He lives in a wider universe than all the other people around him. And that's the thing which later equips him to become king. He has a breadth of insight and imagination the others don't have.

The underlying issues haven't changed since that day 3,000 years ago. It's a challenge as to which reality we're living in. Is it the reality which is dictated by the evening News and the opinions of our neighbours, and the opinion polls in our newspapers and magazines? The reality most people live in.

But the person with a 'prayer-saturated imagination' has another perspective, a wider perspective which sees history as an arena where God's at work.

This kind of perspective doesn't get impressed by people because they happen to be famous or wealthy. It recognizes that real heroes are people who quietly serve God in their own callings – day in, day out. And the people who stick to their faith despite the cynicism of friends and in some cases, the threats of the authorities. These are the really significant people, the unsung heroes of faith.

So one challenge of the David and Goliath story is about my perspective. The 'spectacles' through which I view everything that happens. Another challenge is this:

2) What is My Goliath? In other words, what do I most fear in life? There are some things in life that paralyse us and mean we can't achieve our potential. Things that hold us back from 'fullness of life':

- Fear of death? Fear of losing job? Fear of failure? Fear of being found out?
- Fear of a relationship coming to an end?

That fear stands like a Goliath on the horizon, blocking out the light in your life. A second lesson from the story of David and Goliath is that God is bigger and more powerful than your fear. Turn to God and ask him to help you face that fear and conquer it. And I believe he will.

Part 2: David in the Wilderness (1 Sam 23:14-29)

We're looking at one of the great figures of the Bible, King David. And last week we focussed on the famous incident before David was King over Israel – in fact, when he was still a teenager. And that's the battle with the Philistine Goliath.

We thought about what the challenges might be to us today from that story. Seeing it not as a story for children to colour in, but as a story that's still relevant to our complex adult lives today.

Now we're moving on in the story, to what happens after the Goliath incident. The defeat of Goliath makes the King, King Saul, interested in David. And David becomes friends with the king's son, Jonathan. But the way David defeated Goliath means his fame spreads across the country. He gets a reputation for being a great warrior and leader. And the result of this is that King Saul gets jealous.

In fact so jealous that he tries to kill David. He even throws his spear at David to try to pin him to the wall. When that doesn't succeed, he makes him a commander in the army, so he'll get killed out on the front line. But instead David just wins victories against the foreign armies and marries Saul's daughter Michal. But Saul's a really unstable character and he can see that David could be a rival for his throne. So he redoubles his efforts to kill David.

And there are a series of stories where Saul tries to bump him off, but David is helped by Saul's own children: Jonathan his friend, and Michal his wife. So for several chapters of 1 Samuel, which is where we find a lot of the story of David, David is on the run from Saul, who sees him as a potential rival.

Eventually David ends up in various deserts down near the Dead Sea. And, as you might imagine, they're hot and barren places to be. Not so much big expanses of sand like the Sahara desert, more like hilly rocky terrain. And the only things you're likely to find there are rocks, vultures and a few lizards. Maybe a few hyenas or mountain goats if you're lucky.

And this is where David has to spend several years of his life, being hunted down like a wild animal.

Now think about it. Several years earlier, David had been singled out by a prophet called Samuel who anointed him as a future king of Israel. He defeats Goliath, and becomes the talk of the whole country. So much so that the people even write songs about what a brave warrior he is. Eventually, he ends up becoming the greatest king the nation has even known.

But in between, you have this strange time out in the wilderness. And not even going into the wilderness of his own choosing. He was chased out there. He was in hiding. Living among the rocks and vultures and caves, fearing for his life. It seems like an almighty waste of time. So was it all a waste of time? Was it all a pointless exercise that he had to get through before he could become king?

Well, before we answer that, I think we've got to think about two other important times when people go off into the wilderness. One is the 40 years that Moses and the people of Israel spent wandering in the Sinai desert after escaping from Egypt. And the other is the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness of Judea. And both of these stories have something in common. The desert experience is actually something important. It's a time of learning and growth.

The desert is an empty, bleak place, it's true. But it's also a place of testing. It's a place away from the city and civilization, away from food and comforts, when you're forced to confront big issues. Everything, all the trappings of normal life, are stripped away. All that's left is you, in the emptiness, in the presence of God.

Jesus had to spend time in the desert before he was ready to begin his ministry. He had to fight a battle in himself, a battle with temptation and learning reliance on God, before he could fight a battle out in the world. Moses and the people of Israel were tested in the desert. They were confronted with the truth about themselves, where their real trust and faith lay, away from home and civilization.

And the same is true of David. In the wilderness, he's away from the city, he's away from people and the royal court and its politics, he's away from the songs that have been written about him, and his fame. It's just him, in the presence of God. Everything else stripped away. It's as if he's able to return to the original simplicity of his faith in God. The faith that sustained him all those years he was out looking after the sheep on the hillsides around Bethlehem. Something direct and uncluttered.

And I believe there's a simple and direct challenge for us today from reading about David in the wilderness. In fact there are two challenges. And you might find you relate to one of these more than the other in your life right now.

a) Retreat. The first is this: to find a positive mini-wilderness of your own. Is there a place in your life you can go to get away from things? Where all the complications of life are stripped away and it's just you and God? A place where you can return to the primal simplicity of trust and faith? It might be a place outside your home or work area. It might be a park you can sit in.

It might mean going on what we call a 'retreat' at a special place. It might be a space in the day when you clear the clutter from your mind and everything's stripped away except your awareness of being with God. That's why so many people liked the TV programme *The Monastery*, where a group of people with no faith went to be quiet in a monastery, and they were surprised at what a positive experience it was.

So that's the first challenge. To find a positive wilderness of your own. To choose to enter an emptier place, which can help bring you back to your senses and back to God. That could be a big retreat once a year, and a little retreat every day, quality time with God. The second challenge doesn't feel quite so positive.

b) Suffering. It's a challenge for people who feel they've been chased into a wilderness against their will, as David was. And that wilderness can take many forms.

Maybe it's an illness. Maybe you've found you've got a serious illness and you're crying out, 'Why me?' Maybe it's a place, maybe you really don't like the area you're living in and you wish you could get away from it. But for whatever reason, that's not practical. Maybe your wilderness is a difficult relationship, with a partner or wider family member or a friend. Maybe your personal wilderness is a job you don't like, or having no job at all.

Maybe your wilderness is a crisis of faith. Maybe God doesn't seem as real as he once did. Maybe you've come to the conclusion that either God doesn't exist, or if he does, he's not very interested. Maybe you've been through hard times, and that's knocked your faith, so you're no longer sure if you can really trust God.

We as a family have experienced our own share of wilderness. Personally and in work terms. There isn't time to go into it all now, but having faith and being in church leadership doesn't mean you're immune from wilderness experiences!

Whatever your personal wilderness, I believe there's a lesson from the story of David for you, and also from the story of Moses and Jesus and their times in the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of reality. When the normal comforts of life are stripped away and we're left exposed and vulnerable. It's a place of testing, when what's really in our hearts will come to the surface. It's a place of being alone, and that can feel scary.

But remember what happened to David. He came through his wilderness a wiser man. His heart had been tested and he was ready for kingship. Jesus faced temptation, and learned trust in his heavenly Father. The people of Israel, in the desert, learned a level of reliance on God they could never have learned if they'd moved straight into the promised land.

In each case the desert, the place of rocks and nothingness, becomes a place of hope. The time of testing becomes a time of growth. And in each case, the people who've been in the desert emerge wiser, more mature people, with a clearer vision of God and a deeper reliance on him.

I wonder if there might be a lesson here for those of us going through our own wilderness times. The question to ask in these times is not, 'Oh God, what am I doing here?' Or, 'Oh God, why did you allow me to get into this wilderness?' Perhaps the real question is this: 'Oh God, what can I learn while I'm in this wilderness? What are you teaching me here, that I can't learn any other way?'

For some of you, I believe the message you need to hear today is this: Welcome the wilderness, it's OK to be there, at least for a while. It might seem harsh, inhospitable, and dangerous. And in many ways it is. But as David found, the wilderness is also a place of testing and growth. It's just you and God. It's a place you can find out more about who you really are. And most of all, it's a place you can find out more about who God really is.

Part 3: David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:2-17)

Here's a news story for you. A great leader, a powerful leader at the helm of a major military and economic power. A popular leader with unprecedented poll ratings. A man who claims his faith is important to him.

But he also has a weakness: for beautiful women. One day, he spots a young woman he takes a particular liking to, and when the opportunity arises, he calls her into the state rooms, wows her with the force of his personality, which she's very overawed by, and has a sexual relationship with her. And she's not the first woman he's taken a fancy to in this way. He tries to keep the whole business quiet, but it eventually gets out. Causing a crisis, for him personally and woman he seduced.

Sound familiar? It ought to, to anybody who remembers the mid-1990s. Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. A story with a potent mix of power, sex and religion. Now change the names of people involved. Move it back 3,000 years. And the story hasn't changed much. David and Bathsheba, another saga with a similar mix of power, sex and religion.

But we're rushing ahead of ourselves. First an update on what's happened to David since we left him last week, hiding in the deserts near the Dead Sea, escaping from King Saul, who's jealous and sees David as a threat to his throne.

Part of what happens next is the decline and fall of Saul. Bit by bit he loses his marbles. He gets consumed by jealousy, and more and more vindictive towards David. At one point, he even goes to see a medium, a spiritualist who claims to be able to communicate with the dead. And this goes against God's command to Israel to have nothing to do with spiritualism.

She's called the Witch of Endor, and there's a dramatic moment where she calls up a vision of the Prophet Samuel, who tells Saul in no uncertain terms that God's removing the kingdom from him and giving it to David. Not only that, the following day, he and his sons (including David's friend Jonathan) would all die in battle at the hands of the Philistines, their old enemies. In the event, Saul gets fatally wounded in the battle and ends up taking his own life.

David goes into mourning, and is eventually crowned king over both of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. He makes his capital city Jerusalem, which becomes known as the City of David. David builds up the military might of the newly reunited kingdom and achieves what Saul never managed. He defeats the Philistines.

There's then a period of peace and prosperity in the land. Through a prophet called Nathan, God gives a message to David that his dynasty will last for ever, and David promises to build a Temple for God in Jerusalem. Up to that point there's been no Temple at all. It's also a time when David deepens his faith and trust in God. Then there are some minor wars with a group called the Ammonites. It's during this time that one evening David is out on the roof of his house, getting some fresh air. You've got to remember that the roofs of the houses were flat, and you could easily stroll around up there. And as he looks out over the roofs of the city, he can see into a number of houses. And in one, he sees a woman bathing. He likes what he sees, and sends a servant to find out who she is.

It turns out that her name's Bathsheba and she's married to a man called Uriah, who's a captain in the King's army. David uses his royal influence to summon her to the Palace, and he ends up sleeping with her. Now he seems to think no more about it. But the next thing he gets is a message from Bathsheba, saying she's pregnant. Problem.

But rather than admit his wrongdoing, he hatches a plot to cover it up. He orders Bathsheba's husband to come back from the war and sleep with his wife, so he and everybody else will assume he's the father of the child. The problem is, Uriah refuses. So in the end David orders Uriah to be sent into the front line of battle to guarantee he'll end up getting killed. Which he is, eventually. And then David takes Bathsheba as his own wife. Another wife to add to the ones he already has.

The next thing that happens is that Nathan the prophet challenges David over what he's done. And Nathan's very clever in how he does it. Rather than just confronting the king, he tells him a story about a rich man and a poor man. The rich man has lots of sheep and livestock, but the poor man has just one lamb. When the rich man has a visitor, rather than kill one of his own sheep to feed the guest, he takes the one lamb from the poor man.

And as you can imagine, David gets furious and says that the rich man deserves to die. And here's the twist at the end of the tale: Nathan says, 'Take a look in the mirror. I've just been talking about you. Taking another man's wife, when you've already got several of your own'. And David's stuck forcefully by the reality of what he's done, turns to God in repentance, and goes into mourning.

Now, what do we make of this story? Three lessons from this story of David and Bathsheba:

a) Sin breeds more sin, until the cycle is broken. David at every point had the option of pulling away from his wrong actions. He takes a night-time stroll out on the roof of his palace, because he can't sleep. He sees Bathsheba and his lust is inflamed. He acts on the lust by using his power and influence to get her into bed with him. Then he tries to hide the evidence of his sin by getting the husband home. When that doesn't work he resorts to murder.

It's a sad tale of somebody who starts on a course of wrongdoing and ends up getting in deeper and deeper, as he needs to keep on covering up the last sin. In the end, the whole thing only comes out when it's reached the point of murder. But it needn't have got that far.

And there's a lesson for some of us here. It's tempting to keep on trying to cover up things we've done wrong. One lie can lead to another, a deceit which needs to be covered up. What it takes is the honesty to stop the cycle in its tracks and find forgiveness. Admit what you've done is wrong, take the consequences and have a new start. The alternative is that sin spirals out of control, damaging you and others as it goes. So lesson one: sin breeds sin unless it's stopped.

b) Biblical heroes share our weaknesses. When Michelangelo created his marble statue of David he represented him as a noble king, an example of flawless humanity. But the Bible doesn't gloss over David's flaws. He has a weakness for young women. He's not a good father, he doesn't seem to learn from his mistakes. He ends up in adultery and murdering somebody who never did him any harm.

In fact, you might want to say, 'We live in a society of immorality and injustice. What we want from the Bible is an example of holy living. Instead of which we have a whole catalogue of morally flawed people. People like Samson, Jonah, Jacob, Moses, Peter, and so on. People who say no to God, who have fierce tempers and people who're cheats and murderers.'

This is something we said at the start of the series. The way the Bible works is not usually by presenting flawless people as an example of how we ought to be. It gives us flawed people to identify with. The Bible's not mostly a very morally uplifting story. It's not the account of some golden age. And that's why it's so odd when people see the church as a club which is only for the pure and good.

I was on the phone to an office suppliers and the woman I was talking to said, 'Oooh, you're the second vicar I've had on in the last half hour'. So I said, 'Maybe God's trying to tell you something'. And she said, 'Why? Am I really that bad?' She could only see church people as moral policemen, who judge everybody.

In reality, you read the Bible and it's horrifying that a holy God works through the sort of characters you find there. It's astonishing that God makes his purposes in the world dependent on such morally flawed people. David is part of an Iron Age culture dominated by violence and sex. He's affected by both of those things. But still God uses him. God can use people in all sorts of situations, with all kinds of shortcomings, to carry out his work. And that's good news for you and me. I've heard it put this way: God rides the lame horse and draws lines with crooked sticks. In other words, he does his work with the least promising of instruments.

c) God is the God who forgives. It might sound as if we're saying that what David did wasn't actually so serious. But it was. What he did was evil. None of this adultery and murder would have happened if it hadn't been for David. David has the blood of many people on his hands. And that's a serious matter.

But God is a God who forgives. And the flip side of the coin of forgiveness is repentance. And when David realises what he's done, and admits to how wrong it is, he turns to God and asks for forgiveness. And God forgives him. Now, David still has to live with the consequences of his sin. Uriah stays dead, Bathsheba moves in, she has a baby who dies young, and so on. Repentance doesn't erase the results of the things we do wrong. But it does restore us to fellowship with God. It repairs the bridge that was broken on our side. And it helps clear our conscience and gives us a fresh start.

None of us is beyond the love and forgiveness of God. No matter what we've been in the past. No matter what we've done. Even if you've committed adultery or murder (in your heart, or in reality). God's love is big enough to reach you.

But the process of God's love reaching you and giving you a new start involves repentance. Saying sorry, making a conscious decision to turn away from whatever it is that's damaged your relationship with God, your relationships with other people, and damaged yourself.

It may be that this service, this morning, is when some of us finally turn to God and say: 'I'm sorry. I was wrong. I want that fresh start that David had.'

Let me just end by reading part of the Psalm that David wrote after he'd been hit by the force of what he'd done. I think it's one of the most moving passages ever written. And it comes from David's own bitter experience, (Read: Psalm 51:1-12).