

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
Sunday 2 August 2015 – Year B  
2 Sam.11.26-12.13a; Psalm 51.1-12; Eph.4.1-16; John 6.24-35

If a film is a great success, you can bet your bottom dollar someone will think of making a sequel. Think *Alien*; think *Terminator*; think *Jaws* or *Jurassic Park*. And then there are prequels: what happened before. Think *Star Wars*. It happens with novels, too. There's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a prequel by Jean Rhys to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, which tells the story of what happened to Mrs Rochester before she became the madwoman in the attic. There's *Endeavour* on our screens, which shows us Morse as a young man. It's not just the cash potential which creates the demand, though; there's something about the way great stories reach deep into us that makes us hungry for more. In many cases the results are disappointing. Sequels rarely live up to the power of the original. And they are at least as old as the printing-press. The first cult novel of modern Europe was *Amadis of Gaul*, with its fantasy world of knights and dragons and wicked sorcerers, damsels in distress, and a strong dash of romance. When it appeared, towards the end of the fifteenth century in Spain, just as literacy rates were beginning to rise, it became so popular that the initial four books went on to become twelve and a whole new genre, the chivalric romance, was born. The future St Teresa of Avila, born exactly five hundred years ago, read these tales in secret at all hours of the day and night during her early teens, despite knowing that her father disapproved of them strongly. And Cervantes parodied them in *Don Quixote*, by having an elderly gentleman of modest means imagine himself as reviving the world of knight-errantry. *Don Quixote* proved to be so popular that another author cashed in on it and produced a second part. This stung Cervantes into producing his own, authentic Part II, in which the hapless author of the spurious one is given an unflattering cameo role. So there's nothing new under the sun, as the author of Ecclesiastes remarked. After all, the Bible has its own sequels and prequels. The most famous prequel of all is the beginning of the Gospel of St John, which traces the story of Jesus of Nazareth right back to the creation itself.

In soap operas, episodes usually end on a cliff-hanger, so that we tune in again to discover what happened next. Cliff-hangers occur about twenty-eight minutes after

each episode begins. Thank goodness life is not like that. The Bible is rather more subtle. Last week we heard how king David spotted a beautiful young woman, Bathsheba, bathing on her roof across the narrow valley between his palace and Siloam, where she lived with her husband Uriah. How he did that without binoculars I'm not quite sure, but distance certainly lent enchantment. (How ironical, by the way, that Uriah Heep, one of Dickens's most anti-Semitic characters, takes his name from a biblical character who wasn't Jewish; Bathsheba Everdene, in Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*, on the other hand, is, like her biblical predecessor, caught between competing suitors). Last week's cliffhanger involved Bathsheba getting pregnant by David, who finally gets rid of Uriah by sending him off to the front line, where he is killed. In this week's installment, David does the decent thing. Bathsheba mourns for an appropriate time and he then marries her. Marriage in this biblical world is not yet monogamous; very different from later Jewish and Christian tradition.

It all seems very satisfactory. David has got away with it; Bathsheba has risen in the world. Instead, the scene is set for one of the great showdowns between state and church. Biblical narrative is often quite bare and unadorned. I was reading some book reviews earlier this week and came across a quotation about a Hungarian writer whose novels, the reviewer said, 'were cloaked in an air of mystery that suggested important matters hidden beneath the surface'. Even when the stories or the teachings of the Bible seem to us clear-cut and obvious, closer inspection reveals just that mystery, that hint of a meaning which has to be looked for. Laurence set me thinking about this when she suggested that Bathsheba was more knowing and more in control of events than David. What is she doing bathing on her roof, when the terraces of the king's palace are within visual range and David is well known for his penchant for the ladies? Why does she offer no resistance to his approaches? And then there's a puzzle about David. We are told that David had sent his armies off to fight the Ammonites but that he remained in Jerusalem. Is there a note of criticism here? Has this warrior king become too addicted to his pleasures to lead his armies into battle? We are given no answers; but the way the Bible tells the story gives us space to ask the questions, and in doing so, sense a deeper meaning behind the words.

David is used to visits from Nathan the prophet. It's a bit like the Queen receiving the Archbishop of Canterbury. When our own sovereigns are crowned, Handel's anthem 'Zadok the priest' is always sung; and who should be by Zadok's side than Nathan the prophet when Solomon is anointed king – Solomon, the second son of David and Bathsheba. So when Nathan pitches up in the palace with a story about a rich man who's stolen the one little ewe lamb a poor man had bought and which he had brought up like a member of his family, David isn't at all surprised, even if religious people have this irritating habit of telling a story and not coming to the point. Kings are supposed to dispense justice under God. So, as David listens he gets angrier and angrier and warms to his theme. The rich man's behavior is disgraceful and he deserves to die for his utter selfishness. Just as he is about to ask Nathan who this terrible person was, the prophet turns to him and says 'You are the man!' Nathan proceeds to give David a right royal dressing-down. You had everything you could have wanted – power, riches, women. Instead of being satisfied, you have had a loyal and innocent man killed and then tried to cover it all up. So now I am going to expose you before the whole world. The child you have fathered will not survive. David can say nothing, only 'I have sinned'. Great and powerful as he is, he must humble himself and recognize that he is not immune from justice.

Does this story have anything to say to us? It's not there to titillate (though when she read it last week Jean told me it was gorgeous); still less to make us feel righteous because we haven't engaged in a murderous cover-up. At one level the Bible is dealing with intensely human matters, terrible moral failures and their sad consequences. But all the time it is telling us another story. David could have said 'I'm in charge here – how dare you speak to me like that?' He could have kicked Nathan out or even had him finished off, as Henry II did with Thomas à Becket. But he didn't. He is chastened and repentant, and knows there is a price to be paid for the evil he has done. That enables the story to move on. After Solomon is born he returns to military command; and then fresh tragedy befalls, as Absalom his beloved son rebels against him. The theology of the Bible is not done through abstract ideas and speculation. It is flesh-and-blood; theology in the raw. As ours should be too; rooted in the realities which surround us, from our small everyday concerns to the larger

plight of victims of terror, war and hunger. We do not practice a theology of sound-bites, but of serious engagement with the issues of the time; no easy answers tripping off the tongue, but a deep and prayerful wrestling with faith and hope and love and what they might ask of us.

Here's another example. In his Gospel, John provides a long sequel to the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, in the form of a dialogue the following day between Jesus and the crowd. It is often at cross purposes and provokes many questions. Three of them are voiced by the crowd: 'When did you come here?', 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' and 'What sign are you going to give us, so that we may see it and believe you?' They can't work out how he has got to be on the other side of the lake when they had watched the disciples row across in the only boat that was there, without Jesus, who has, of course, been walking on the water. Fair enough; they can hardly have been expected to guess that. But their other questions are stranger. Do they want the power to multiply loaves and fishes for themselves? Is that what they mean by performing the works of God? And why are they asking for Jesus to perform a sign so that they can believe in him when they have just witnessed an extraordinary one, have concluded that he is the Messiah and tried to make him their king? Why do they refer to the sign given to their ancestors when they were fed with manna in the wilderness when only the evening before they have witnessed something even more extraordinary? The answers Jesus gives to their questions are indirect and provocative. He tells them they have come looking for him not because they want to see signs but to get another free meal; that to perform the works of God is to believe in the one God has sent, that is, him; and that the miraculous manna which fed their ancestors in the wilderness was but a shadow of the true bread from heaven which gives life to the world.

The world of the Bible is in some ways very remote from our own, given all our advances in scientific knowledge. But when it comes to what makes people tick and the mistakes they make it is often too close for comfort. Imagine a modern-day Nathan knocking on George Osborne's door and telling him in no uncertain terms that to come down heavily on the working poor and protect the well-to-do is displeasing to God. I can't see him changing his mind. I can also hear the voice of modern people

when the crowd asks for signs. They want to be certain, and certainty is the enemy of faith because it leaves no room for choice. Imagine what human life would be like if there was no choice; if you simply had to do as you were told. Actually, we know what it's like. It's like George Orwell's frightening vision of the future in 1984. It's like living under a totalitarian regime which imposes its will on you and which punishes severely any form of dissent. That's why the heroes and heroines of literature and films are so often people who refuse to conform. The people in the crowd who wanted a sign from Jesus wanted there to be no doubt that this was the one. But religious regimes – theocracies – in which those in charge are certain of the truth and try to create a society in which everyone must follow their dictates do not have a good track record; not in our own flirtation with them during the Cromwellian Commonwealth, and certainly not in the territories held by the so-called Islamic State today. When you are certain you possess God's truth, have the right answer to all the questions and hold political power, you end up persecuting and torturing and murdering those who dare to be different.

That's one of the reasons why faith offers a better way. It saves us from dogmatic certainty. It leaves room for choice and it does not stop questions being asked which have no easy answer. It encourages humility and its language is of the search and the journey towards a destination which as yet we do not see. Should we follow the way of Jesus because he astounds us and compels us into belief by displays of supernatural power? Or do we choose to follow him because of the kind of loving he represents in his living and his dying; because we find in that a pattern for our own growth and for the healing of society's wounds? Some people say that faith is irrational and infantile. That is, to put it mildly, complete codswallop. Faith does not provide alternative explanations of our world to those our scientists discover, nor does it require us to read the words of Scripture as God's self-evident, infallible truth. Christians who insist that it does are living in fairyland and need to grow up. It only asks us to make a choice and then allow our lives to be guided by it: a choice to let the words and the deeds, the dying and the rising of Jesus Christ become light for our darkness and strength for our weakness and freedom to ask all the questions we like.