

1 Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 5 August 2012 (Year B)
2 Sam.11.26-12.3a; Psalm 51.1-13; Eph.4.1-16; John 6.24-35

‘We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming’ (Eph. 4.14).

How impressionable do you think you are? Do you automatically believe something must be true, just because you read it in the papers or see it on television? Almost every time I see a documentary or read an article about something I have some knowledge of, I am taken aback by how the topic is spun in an odd way, so that a marginal element becomes central, an oddball theory is treated as a fact or an odd angle becomes the main focus. It makes me wonder about everything else which is presented to us as factual, when it may be no more than opinion. Did the EU really want us only to eat straight bananas, yet another madcap scheme dreamt up by barmy Brussels bureaucrats? When you read the regulation that doesn’t seem to be the case; but if we want to believe it because we dislike the EU, we will, whatever the evidence. Did aliens really land in Roswell, New Mexico in 1948 and has there been a conspiracy to keep their existence secret from the public? Despite my normally sceptical nature, a little bit of me wants to believe that they did. Did we hope that politicians, media barons and bankers were people of absolute integrity who only sought high office or positions of influence so that they could serve the public good? If so, we will have been thoroughly disillusioned by now. Yet for every one who abuses power there will be many who at least try to behave honourably and are not in it simply to line their own pockets. There is a real danger for democracy that if we come to believe that corruption is so endemic in public life that there’s no point in voting, others with more sinister agendas will step in to fill the void. It has happened before.

The author of Ephesians tells us: ‘We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming’ (Eph. 4.14). Yet we are so easily led by whatever the latest fashionable ideas or opinions may be and do not habitually ask what the Gospel perspective might

be, let alone seek that maturity and full measure of the stature of Christ which Ephesians sets before us as our goal. So I'd like to explore for a little while what this might imply.

In the story of King David's seduction of Bathsheba and his sending of her husband off to the wars with instructions to the commander-in-chief that he be placed in the front line to make sure he is killed, we have reached the moment of truth. In one of the most spine-tingling moments in biblical narrative Nathan the prophet - the spiritual leader of the people - comes to the king, who is the dispenser of justice, with a story about a rich man who had many flocks but who stole the one ewe lamb which a poor man had treated as a member of his family. David falls straight into the trap, because he takes the story at face value. He becomes so angry with the man who could do such a thing that he passes what amounts to a death sentence on him. Then Nathan delivers the killer blow: 'You are the man!' He spells it out, every little bit of David's sordid, deceitful scheming. He passes sentence on the king: the sword shall never depart from his house, which is indeed the case - remember the rebellion of his beloved son Absalom. David confesses his sin; the death sentence on him is commuted but passes to the child Bathsheba will bear him. That's not the end of the story, of course. But the one good thing David does is to recognise that he has done a terrible wrong. Powerful people rarely do that. Even at the Levenson Enquiry they have been rather muted in their apologies or tried to shift the blame on to others. But there's no wriggle-room for David. Nathan has got him cornered; all his attempts at a cover-up have failed and have been exposed for what they are.

In this moment of self-realisation David grows up. He doesn't try to talk his way out of it or use his power to silence Nathan. It costs a lot for so powerful and charismatic a leader to acknowledge so great a sin. The only words he has left are 'I have sinned'. He reminds me of the publican in the Gospel parable who can only pray what the Orthodox world knows as the Jesus prayer, 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner'. David will have to live with the consequences of what he has done, including terrible strife within his own family. But, humbled and contrite, he can move on. The normal

human response is to blame others for what has gone wrong - siblings, parents, politicians, immigrants - anyone but ourselves and anything other than taking responsibility for our own actions when they have hurt others. In the way of Jesus, the log-jam starts to break when we know ourselves to fall short of what God asks of us, because that is the moment when the liberating word of forgiveness becomes possible. English people are famous for saying 'I'm sorry' when they haven't done anything wrong, when, for example, someone has bumped into them, a not altogether displeasing trait. But the genuine expression of sorrow for a wrong done is one of the most powerful forces for good known in our world. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa and Rwanda have revealed a more creative way of dealing with a murderous past than the usual cry for revenge. The Queen's visit to the Irish Republic last year won the admiration of many who would have counted themselves bitter opponents of the British Crown, because she had the courage and the wisdom to acknowledge the wrongs that had been done in the past.

So one of the signs of our maturing in faith is the courage to apologise and enable forgiveness to begin. None of us, perhaps, will make errors quite as grave as David's, but in our own way we need to practise the difficult art of saying sorry when we know we are in the wrong, rather than springing to our defence and blaming others; for there is no way for the grace of forgiveness to work its healing balm.

Another sign comes in the description of the Christian community in Ephesians 4. In the world as it is we're always having to jostle for position and shout to make ourselves heard. People buy into dangerous and destructive myths: that because they are rich they can do as they please or have rights which others do not; that because they are in a position to exercise power, either directly or, more commonly, through being manipulative, they can ensure that they get their own way. Our culture encourages us to measure ourselves all the time against dreams of untold wealth or physical attractiveness. Now wonder people feel ground down, think they are failures; no wonder they follow this fad or that one, and are tossed about, not knowing which direction to turn. Well, there are no failures in God's sight; none, at any rate, that

cannot be turned around by the embrace of his love. God does not judge us by our status or our looks. God has given us an alternative picture of a community whose values are his. The Church was never meant to be an end in itself, but a place where we learn and practise values like mutual acceptance, forbearance and kindness, and seek justice with peace. The picture of many gifts and callings which cohere in one body and which need each other in order for anyone to come to maturity is a redemptive one. It is the model for a society in which everyone has a place, no one is excluded, and each makes a contribution to the whole, no matter how small. Try to imagine that in this world where grasping greed and abuse of power are endemic, or where different members of the same community are fighting and killing one another, and you will see how revolutionary it is. It is also very difficult, which is why the Church so consistently fails to live up to the ideal and why we need to be reminded of it and rehearse its lessons week by week.

Our final picture of Christian maturity comes in the aftermath of the feeding of the five thousand in St John's Gospel. John is at pains to make his readers aware that the real meaning of the sign is spiritual, not physical. Do you remember how in his temptations in the wilderness before his ministry could begin Jesus rejects the quick road to popularity and power by turning stones into bread and ruling the kingdoms of the earth? After the feeding, John tells us that the crowds wanted to take Jesus by force and make him their king. He withdraws into the hills, but the next day the crowds come looking for him. He tells them that they are doing so not because they saw a sign but because they had eaten their fill. He's their latest hope to lead a rebellion against Rome, and he is also a free meal ticket. Politics and food are important, but in the arguments which follow Jesus consistently points to the deeper human hunger for bread which does not perish of which the feeding was a sign, and proclaims himself to be that bread of life. It's a wonderful demonstration of the way literal interpretations of the Bible can rob it of its power. Jesus is enacting signs which point to deeper truths; the crowds rush around in the hope that he will bring a quick fix to their problems. It's almost as if he is encouraging them to grow up; to

grow out of a childish dependence on strong leaders and providers of food and into a more mature understanding in which they take responsibility for themselves and see through the illusion that all we need to be happy is a full stomach.

The power of forgiveness to break through the log-jam; the community in which everyone has a place and a purpose; the sign of the multiplied bread as a challenge to the assumption that all we need to be happy is our fill of physical comforts, never mind the aching void in the soul which cries out in pain for a hunger which they cannot satisfy. These are not some fairytales or irrelevant myths. They touch the brokenness of our world and our selves where they hurt the most. They offer a stable foundation for creative living, in which we are 'no longer be children, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming'. Is it surprising, then, that at the heart of Christian worship we are invited to share the signs of the one who offers himself, body and blood, for our healing? Or that it is the one who stands silent before Pilate and hangs powerless on the Cross whose kingdom shall have no end?