

Wheatley United Reformed Church

Sunday 21 June 2015

I Sam.17.32-49; Ps 9.9-10; 2 Cor.6.1-13; Mark 4.35-41

Unfortunately, the Bible does not tell us what Goliath's bedtime reading was. Philistines have acquired a bad name, and if he lived up to our modern usage he would probably have had a pile of comics by his bedside; certainly not Jane Austen or Stephen Hawking's *Brief History of Time*. For us, Philistines are people who aren't remotely interested in books or art or music and who sneer at people who are; which is almost certainly unfair to the original people of that name, who appear as the chief enemies of the Israelites for several centuries and then disappear from history. Not a great deal is known about them other than what the Bible tells us. But the biblical Philistines no doubt had a culture and there must have been artists, musicians and philosophers among them, as well as warriors. The reason the Philistines get such a bad press in the Bible is that they controlled the coastal strip along the Mediterranean, the major trade route of the ancient world between Asia and Africa, confining the Israelites to the hill country in the centre of Palestine. The two sides were constantly fighting to gain territory from each other. And then they worshipped idols, probably the same ones as the Canaanites, like Baal; but there are plenty of examples of idol-worship in modern life; not least when people devote all their energies to the accumulation of wealth or the acquiring of fame; or even when they worship printed words or manmade traditions in place of the living God.

The contest between David and Goliath has passed into our language as a byword for the triumph of native wit and cunning over brute strength. We like it when that happens; when little people win victories over powerful individuals or entrenched bureaucracies. Might isn't always right. It's the heroism of the Resistance which inspires us, not the jackboots marching across Europe, because all the odds are stacked against its agents; yet, despite the extreme risks they faced they could give armed convoys a nasty surprise. It's the individuals who stand up to the collective might of states and ideologies and show up their shaky foundations who get our vote. I recall the defiant gesture of a protestor who stuffed flowers into the gun turret of a tank when Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968. It didn't prevent years of

repression but the gesture spoke louder than words. I seem to recall, too, that on the day the Berlin Wall fell and the Iron Curtain with it, the soldiers manning the East German gates were confused as to what they should be doing. One of them decided to open the gate on the checkpoint he was manning. He could have decided to continue the policy of shooting people who were attempting to cross into West Berlin; but he didn't. On such small decisions hangs great history.

So if I have a theme this morning it is about the importance small things can have to make a great difference, and that is counter-cultural; it goes against the way we have been encouraged to think, which is that big is desirable and powerful. The more you have the happier you will be and the more you can get your way. The more people envy your lifestyle as you flit around the globe on your private jet from one mansion to another the better you will feel about yourself. Funny that, because the facts don't seem to fit the theory: so many lives ruined by addictions of various kinds in a desperate search for a fulfilment which always proves elusive. And no, I am not speaking out of envy, but out of a deep sadness for the way we are so quickly seduced by the myths and idols of our time, without even recognising them for what they are.

The three biblical readings this morning seem to have little in common. David, against all the odds, defeats Goliath. Paul sets up a series of contrasts to explain the way of discipleship: treated as impostors who yet speak the truth; poor, yet making many rich; all kinds of persecutions and hardships, met only by the weapons of kindness, holiness and love. And finally, Jesus stills a storm on the sea of Galilee. But each of them contains a nugget of this counter-cultural treasure.

The match between David and Goliath is not quite as unequal as it seems, because David has assessed the situation and seen behind all the show of brute force to where Goliath's weakness lies. Where Goliath is encumbered with heavy armour, David travels light and can move quickly. He observes that Goliath's forehead is unprotected and chooses the most effective weapon to attack the spot, a slingshot; probably learnt from his experience as a shepherd in seeing off the lions and bears which threatened the flock. So whereas Goliath simply trusts, as he always has, in his sheer physical prowess, David adopts a flexible and intelligent approach. He knows he can't beat Goliath in hand-to-hand combat, but he works out an alternative strategy which has a

good chance of success. If you read the text carefully, you will see that the stone which fells Goliath does not kill him; it knocks him unconscious, so that in a final twist to the tale David can use the warrior's own sword to finish him off. The very weapon which was meant to deliver victory to the Philistines becomes the cause of their downfall, and all because of a shepherd boy who is not intimidated by their champion.

As history, the story may be too violent for our tastes, even though we seem to have an endless appetite for the histories of more recent wars: this very weekend the battle of Waterloo is being re-enacted two hundred years on, and its slaughter was on a much greater scale than anything the Israelite and Philistine armies managed. But as an object lesson in how to resist and defeat a formidable foe the story has lost none of its fascination. It becomes, in the hands of some of its early commentators, an exemplary demonstration of how a great evil can be overcome; not by fighting it on its own terms but by attacking it in a way it does not expect and against which its defences are weak. It is hard for us, as we look around our own world, not to feel helpless in the face of the violence of terrorism and the misery and poverty to which so many are condemned; just like Saul and his captains, having to listen day after day to the taunts of Goliath with no idea as to how they can escape defeat at his hands. Then along comes a most unlikely solution, in the form of a savvy lad, who refuses to accept that defeat is inevitable and uses his cunning to win an improbable victory. Perhaps we are wrong to assume that military might will eventually crush ISIS and should listen more to those who understand its appeal and how best to counter it. Perhaps we are wrong to imagine that poverty can be eradicated simply by governments throwing large sums of money at it and should listen more carefully to those on the ground who develop strategies which demonstrably work, on however small a scale. One way or another, the story tells us that brute force is not invincible; there is always a weak point; and, just as importantly, the people who understand this are not necessarily those who have what the great and the good consider the right qualifications.

As someone used to teaching literature, what strikes me most about Paul's account of the life of discipleship is the series of antitheses or opposites in which it is couched. He lists nine different experiences which any of us would find hard to bear, from

disasters and physical violence to hunger and sleepless nights; and against these sets nine positive qualities as varied as patience, knowledge and holiness. The bad experiences, like beatings and imprisonment, are in part how the authorities treat these irritating Christians and, like hardships and disasters, in part the necessary consequence of being a disciple in the first place. The good qualities are the spiritual gifts with which all these unpleasant things can not only be borne but resisted. In some parts of the world Christians are very exposed to persecution, even martyrdom, and Paul's words will speak to them directly. Our own travails as disciples in western Europe are more to do with why people aren't interested in listening, why our congregations aren't growing, how we can even survive as churches. But they can certainly weigh us down. We easily grow discouraged and depressed; wonder whether it's worth it; why bother at all. We wear ourselves out trying to keep the show on the road and start to think that perhaps all those voices that tell us it's all a load of nonsense are right. But that's to follow conventional wisdom and act the part of Saul and his captains in the face of Goliath. If it all depended on us, that might be appropriate. But just as there is a David waiting in the wings so, Paul tells us, there is energy and power available to us from little things that make all the difference - genuine love, truthful speech, the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left. That righteousness, importantly, is not our own; it is born in the lifeblood of Christ, grows as we follow his way, gives us courage and strength and vision where before we could see no hope at all. 'As having nothing', Paul tells us in his final contrast, nothing, that is, that the world thinks valuable; 'yet possessing everything', everything that is needed to let the words of Christ open hearts, the touch of Christ heal broken lives, the life of Christ rise from all the places where death holds sway. We should, Paul suggests, expect to live with obstacles and disappointments on the one hand and counter them with confidence in God's gifts on the other.

I shan't dwell on the story of Jesus stilling the storm. But perhaps we don't always realise that it is the disciples in the boat who had the advantage. After all, they were fishermen and they knew the moods of the lake like the back of their hand. It can't have been the first time they were caught out in a storm and they should have known how to ride it out. Quite how Jesus managed to sleep through it all I don't know;

whether or not his words ‘Peace! Be still!’ were intended for the disciples rather than the raging wind we cannot tell; but already by the time of Mark they were interpreted as a sign of his mastery over the elements. It is only afterwards, when calm is restored, that he asks them why they were afraid and if they still have no faith. If, as some scholars think, Mark was written at a time of persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, the story may be a parable of its times. The boat and its occupants represent the fragile Church, at the mercy of its bloodthirsty opponents. The many possible layers of this story, fascinating though they are, concern me less than the simple fact that two tiny little words in the Greek, ‘Peace! Be still!’ halt the storm in its tracks. For sometimes the right word in the right moment can have more power than raging winds: a word of kindness for someone who feels bruised; a word of consolation for someone who is in distress; a word of peace when tempers fray and anger threatens to overwhelm. And these are all things we can do.

So, in this biblical world which goes against the grain of how we have been used to thinking, a lightly armed but canny youngster achieves victory against all the odds. The call to discipleship recognises its cost, but sets against it God-given weapons which do not destroy but give life. A word stills a storm. So I ask, as Jesus did in the moment of calm: And are we afraid? Have we still no faith?