

PENTECOST 10 YEAR B / 5 AUGUST 2012 / EAGLEHAWK 10 AM

David needed another wife like an obese person needs a feed of fish and chips. Did you notice what Nathan says in passing about David's marital status? Speaking on God's behalf Nathan says "I gave you your master's house and your master's wives". We don't know how many wives King Saul had but we can take it it was enough. Plus, David also had at least two others: Abigail and Michal whom he had acquired before becoming king. He didn't need another woman for any sense of sexual gratification, so what was his motivation in doing what he did to ensure that Bathsheba became part of his stable of wives?

I read something fascinating about trends in our society over the last 50 or more years. In the early 1950s the standard size of home with which a couple started out was about 10 squares. In fact I lived in such a house which my Dad built in Swan Hill and in which he and Mum lived with us six kids. The normal size of a garage in new homes now in America is, guess what? Ten squares. Now combine that with sociological polls which gauge people's degrees of happiness. Our peak level of happiness with our lives in western society occurred around the end of the 1950s and has been declining ever since. Put another way, as our wealth increases and accumulates our happiness goes down. Is that the message you get from the advertisements suggesting that you must have the latest and the biggest in whatever is being thrust at you? Hardly! It is the opposite message: without this latest and biggest you are so obviously jeopardizing your happiness and well-being. Did someone once say "Blessed are the poor.."? Perhaps those words are worth pondering anew.

My point is that just as we do not need anything more to make us happy, nor did David need another wife. It was for no other reason than the desire to acquire and possess – the very same instincts to which the advertising industry appeals – it was for no other reason that David did what he did to acquire Bathsheba into his collection of wives. I find it interesting that the character of Nathan appears on the scene to challenge the king by means of this parable, accept David's confession, and make a proclamation about David's future and then completely disappear from the story line of 2 Samuel. Some scholars have suggested on this basis that this story is writing back into history a story designed to explain why things happened as they did for David following his marriage to Bathsheba: such as the rebellion of Absalom and the awful mess his family became. Be that as it may, the point of the story remains the same and extracting that meaning is the object of our exercise.

The means by which the prophet captured the attention of the king is a key. He tells a story which is in fact a parable. He not only captures David's attention, he also captures his imagination in such a way as to make David look with a new lens at the choices he has made. Jeannie and I went to a funeral over at Broughton near Nhill on Monday. The minister leading the funeral service was a clergyman from the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia. You'll be forgiven if you've never heard of them. They are fearfully pure: they will not allow the strains of a musical instrument to turn their minds to evil as they worship; they sing nothing but English translations of the psalms from the Old Testament; and they stand up to pray (which is a good way to prevent people from falling asleep during the long extempore prayers that are prayed). There was an excellent eulogy given by a member of the extended family in which was embedded a beautiful message about healing and relationships: the bloke who was being buried was a very difficult person to relate to. But then this minister had to preach the word. It was one of the worst sermons I have ever heard simply because it was cliché upon cliché of old evangelical phrases and demanded not one piece of imagination for its whole boring length.

It is through our imaginations that our souls catch fire, never through tired old clichés which in large part have completely lost their meaning. Try and find anything that might look like a cliché in Jesus' teaching. Indeed, as one author suggested, he taught nothing except in parables. And that is what happened to David: his imagination was captured as were his emotions by this story that Nathan told. You can feel that fired emotion in David's words: "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and

because he had no pity." And when Nathan responds with his words "You are that man" David did not need to ask "What do you mean, I am that man?" His heart was convicted as he saw with a new lens through this parable exactly what his greed and self-focussed desires had led him to do and the hurt and pain he had inflicted on others.

In a sense, there was nothing David could do to make things right. He had said in his self-righteous response on hearing the parable that the person who had done this heinous thing of taking the one lamb owned by the poor man and slaughtering it for his feast.. that that person should pay back four-fold what he had taken. Bit late for David to make that sort of recompense. He had had Uriah killed. And what would be the point of turning Bathsheba out: where would she go without a husband? What sort of a life would she have had then? Perhaps he did do something for Bathsheba's relatives or Uriah's wider family: we don't know. But if the point of the story is not that it restores the human situation to what it was then what is it? It brought David back into right relationship with God and perhaps he saw his role as king in a new light through this experience.

"If I had my time over again..." is a phrase often used when one is about to express some regret about the choices one has made and the direction in which one's life has gone as a result of those choices. If I had my time over again I would not become a minister. If I could have passed those rotten accountancy exams I would have become an accountant with a very different life and lifestyle from the one I have had. Hopefully, I would have been a better father who had more time to spend with his kids, taking more part in their sports and other pursuits. I have actually written to my kids apologizing for not being there as much as I should have been when they were younger and always being caught up with other people's needs. I vividly remember, in my first parish, being out for meetings and services 13 nights in a row: thinking I was doing the Lord's work, while constantly dashing off from the tea table before the kids got to bed.

But, certain choices move our lives in certain directions and we may never again return to that place where we may make the other choice with hindsight and pursue another road. I wonder if anyone has read Scott Peck's book "The Road Less Travelled". Well the title of that book comes from a poem by the American poet Robert Frost. We will have a closer look at the poem tonight as part of our studies in Ruth and how the two daughters-in-law made different choices about which road they would travel in relation to their futures. But let me just read the poem for you now.

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
and sorry I could not travel both
and be one traveler; long I stood
and looked down one as far as I could
to where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*then I took the other, as just as fair
and having perhaps the better claim,
because it was grassy and wanted wear;
though as for that, the passing there
had worn them really about the same,*

*and both that morning equally lay
in leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
somewhere ages and ages hence:
two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less travelled by,*

and that has made all the difference.

David would have regretted his action with regard to Bathsheba and Uriah all his life, especially when he could do nothing to make it right. Just like we may look back and wish we had not done certain things or taken certain decisions. But as with David, and this story, the healing comes first by getting in touch with that and seeking peace with God even in the light of it.

In some versions of our bibles there is an inscription above Psalm 51 which reads something like: "A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." If David did write the psalm it would certainly fit that context. As I read it in preparation for today I pondered whether it gives a clear picture of someone who is at peace with himself. I'm not sure. I think he is on the way but not quite there. For me, the key to the psalm is found in verse 6. Let me remind you of what it says: "You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart." Depth psychologists tell us that we live our lives very much at the surface, that we are not in touch with the deeper things going on within. We live very much at the level of the ego and it is only when we are asleep that the true us finds its freedom to explore. Do you ever wonder about your dreams: what are they and what do they mean? We just write them off as weird and sometimes embarrassing. They are actually telling us things about ourselves that our conscious lives very rarely get in touch with and they are loaded with symbolic meaning. But we haven't got time for all that: we've got things to do, things to buy, places to go in our caravan.

Whatever David means by those words of verse 6 he at least means that he wants to live his life at a deeper level than the one which had him lust after Bathsheba and in a cruel exercise of brute power have her husband killed just so that he could satisfy that lust. And friends, think about the level at which so much that we see and hear is inviting us to live: it is so visceral, almost animal like: completely non-reflective: "just do it" (as the tee shirt says). And certainly this psalm is expressing a deep-felt need to go deeper and to draw on the reality of God to heal and restore and set new values for David.

Now you could think in reading the psalm that it is only the individual writer's relationship with God which is important. But remember what the trigger for the writing of this psalm was: it was the cruel abuse of power in relationships between people, revealed by the prophet to the king. In other words the two dimensions of relationships are interwoven: being out of step with God has implications for how you treat and relate to people, and vice versa. There is an interdependence of life in our universe: surely we are discovering that in relation to the way we have treated this planet. Indeed, our relationship with the planet could well be compared with David's relationship with people before his eyes were opened. We have assumed that we can take what we want and that there will be no consequences to the lust for more and more. Similarly, when we hurt our fellow creatures, we hurt God. When we ignore or violate creation, we violate God, stifling God's vision of Shalom. We cannot have individual salvation: a salvation which assumes that we can be right with God through some private contract we have with God and at the same time be in bad relationship with others and with God's creation. Which leads me to the Ephesians passage, briefly.

Paul is here obviously using the image of a human body as part of the way he sees relationships within the fellowship of believers. You will recall his exposition of that image in 1 Corinthians 12: that we are all a bit like an eye or an ear or a foot: all needing one another to be a body. Nowhere in Paul's thought is there a suggestion that we have to work at creating unity. Unity is the given not the goal.

Listen again to verse 3: "making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The basis of that he states in the next verse: "There is one body and one Spirit." I used to hate it when my kids fought; it did something deep within me as though it was a denial of the reality of our family. Our kids owed each other something by dint of being part of our family. Paul gives the means by which we may maintain our family as the body of Christ.

(read Ephesians 4:2)

I have asked this question virtually all my life as a minister in the church: What do members of a congregation owe one another? What does it mean in terms of your relationship with that person across the church to whom you have never spoken and don't even know their name? I'm not sure. Paul's letters were written to groups of people much smaller in number than the number here this morning: they were really house groups who could fit into a home. But his words here are a pretty good start in the way we at least relate to those to whom we do speak on a Sunday morning and with whom we may work in some activity: humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love. Those graces exercised in the way we relate do not create a unity among us: that is a given. But they will most certainly maintain that unity and enhance it for our mutual blessing.