



Third Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 13 June 2021

READINGS

1 Samuel 17: 32-49; Psalm 9: 9-20; 2 Corinthians 6 1-13; Mark 4: 35-41

Take charge of the boats

I think each one of today's readings would make a fascinating film. The Bible has many good stories, and here are a few fascinating scenes. David and Goliath is an obvious one. The mighty monster in the Philistine army facing the beleaguered army of Israel whose biggest man, King Saul, is no match for him, is surely a scene of great tension. Then along comes a young, very gorgeous man, David the shepherd, who is cheeky enough to offer to take on the monster, on the basis that he had dealt with lions and bears while caring for sheep, and this man would be a doddle, particularly since God was on the side of the Israelites. In addition, he refuses the offer of armour, and takes five stones, walks up to the man, slings one into his forehead, and the giant Goliath is dead. Drama!

Today's reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is a summary of the whole life of Paul. From the startling account of his conversion, the whole film would be a mixture of wonderful victories for Christ, and then horrendous conflict, ending up with beatings, stoning and imprisonment, with all the joy, suffering and frustrations those things would bring. But throughout the film, we would be aware that Paul did this for Christ, right up until his martyr's death. More drama

And our Gospel reading – Jesus asleep in a little fishing boat during the ferocious lake Galilee storm, with all the drama the special effects team can come up with, so that the viewers are clutching their seats – and through it all, Jesus sleeps. And when they wake him, wow! The storm abates immediately, and the frightened disciples are now awestruck for a totally different set of reasons. And then Jesus roundly tells them off for lacking faith. What are we supposed to make of that? Drama plus.

Of course, any film maker will not focus on the God- message, but rather on what the public want to see, and here we must be careful to keep our eyes focused on what God was saying. David's confidence was in the God of Israel, who gave him the victory. Jesus' rebuke was that HE was with the disciples, and Paul suffered for the glory of God and spread the Gospel.

Even so, it is all very exciting stuff. I wonder if our familiarity with these events has lost them its drama, and we come to church either longing for spiritual comfort, or else with the anxiety of never being good enough, and we beat ourselves up for whatever sin is worrying us at that moment. We miss the life shattering drama of what it means to follow Jesus, and the glorious adventure it must have been, and still is in many people's lives.

Adventure is a part of our lives that we don't think a lot about, but it is a very important part of it, particularly when we are younger. There is something heady about taking on new challenges, and going ahead in spite of the "be careful" warning from those who love us and will have to pick up the pieces if it goes wrong. Many of our greatest artists and leaders defied those in charge and did it their way, and many of our Nobel Laureates, were no good at school and had to struggle for the support which ultimately contributed much to us, and gave them this valued prize. Even the structure of the vaccines against Covid began in the 1990's where a Hungarian born scientist Katalin Kariko believed that harnessing the power of RNA would enable the human body to reject disease. The University of Pennsylvania where she was working didn't believe it would work, and no one would give her the funding to continue the research. After 5 years in 1996, she was demoted because she was not adding value to the science department. She nearly gave up, but she didn't. Eventually, she and her partner Drew Weissman found a way of tweaking it so it would get into the body bypassing the normal human defences and work against disease. By 2005 it was in research journals. This is now one of the most innovative and useful weapons we have in our arsenal of vaccines and anti-disease remedies, including the possibility of treating brain cancers. This type of life is in line with what Paul went through – endless frustration and suffering, but in the end, it all paid off.

We celebrate Youth Day this week, when our young people took to the streets in a very dangerous world to protest against the proposed education legislation which would have made their lives more difficult. In some ways it marked the watershed of the anti-apartheid struggle, and 18 years after that, we held our first democratic elections. But what did it cost? And how many parents and grandparents worried about what the children were doing to themselves? And these days, with so much gained, do we ask ourselves if our children as a whole haven't lost that sense of adventure that identifies the young, creative attitude that is essential for achieving so much more? There is much that the church needs to do to restore our youth to their full potential.

Firstly, we see with David and Paul, they both had a strong sense of their identity in the God they worshipped. They acted for God and their confidence in the rightness of their cause lay on a firm foundation that trusted and believed in God. Without such moral and spiritual basis, the youth's sense of adventure becomes a recklessness that shows itself in delinquent behaviour and in adventures with alcohol and drugs and speeding and such a reversal of values, that law enforcement, such as it is, becomes the enemy, and doing wrong is glorified. How will we promote a valid moral outlook in a society where God plays no role outside of Sunday worship?

Secondly, we see that David came to the battle prepared. Years of shepherding had given him the skills to take on another enemy. He knew his strengths, had confidence in what he could do, and in the name of God, he did it. If we look at the disciples in that boat, we know they had little faith. In fact, they had less faith in themselves that Jesus had in them. What sort of person sleeps in a little boat throughout a storm unless he had absolute faith that those manning the boat knew what they were doing? As they were skilled fishermen, so they became skilled fishers of men. The question we must ask ourselves is, are our young people suitably equipped to take on those adventures which will change the world? Our country spends more money on education than most others, but we are still at the bottom of the world tables in maths and science. How are our youngsters going to face the huge scientific demands which are going to face our continent when climate change is going to mean temperatures hotter than they are now, and a very real threat of water-availability? Can God use our young people when they are so woefully equipped? How can we as a church cause reform the education of our young people, or at least, bring pressure to bear on the authorities to improve this vital aspect of their lives?

Thirdly, we see that David was part of a community which was now run by a king, and the prophet Samuel was also a very important part of ordered, life in Israel. Jesus walked the earth when his people were very conscious of their identity in God, and he had a strong basis upon which to teach, but the efficiency of Roman administration gave a sound structure to society. In the same way, Paul had a strong message for a world which had its faith-consciousness, whatever religion that was, but he was also able to travel on very well-made Roman roads, and the peace which came from a very powerful administration meant there were few things to prevent the Gospel being spread, and there were always willing ears to at least listen, even if they didn't want to accept the Gospel.

Our youth live in a disordered culture where, because of the huge divide between rich and poor, most of your youth have too little to eat, and the resulting depravity leads to a moral depravity too. Our poorest children have witnessed murders, gender based and other violence, and their philosophy of life is about survival rather than living. Feeding yourself, honestly or through theft, keeping out of the way of thugs and bullies, particularly those in your own family, and a place to keep warm represent a successful life. There's no scope for vision and the adventure instinct often finds its outlet in gangs and crime. Teachers who have a vision for these students and would go the extra mile are quickly disillusioned because they fear for their lives from some very rough, dysfunctional, armed learners.

Those at the other end of the spectrum have the very best of everything that money can buy, but the pressure to get the results that society, their expensive school and their parents expect puts huge pressure on them, and there is no time for natural curiosity and deciding what they were born to do, nor can they risk being adventurous, unless it's to explore underage drinking and driving too fast in birthday-present cars. In many cases the teachers are prevented from doing their job of correcting mistakes and teaching discipline because they are constantly monitored by the child's parents and the family lawyer. How will we as a church reform our society so it will nurture and support our children so they can be the best that God created them to be?

The society's ills are huge, and our children are in tiny boats mostly without responsible adults to steer them. Jesus is there, but he wants us to take charge of the boats. Our society is letting children down very badly, and our church has little influence beyond its walls. Youth need our time, money, involvement, prayers and our love if they are going to get through. Let us call out to the Lord in this storm, and have faith in his ability to bring peace. But let us never forget that he has faith in us too, that we will steer our little boats with all the skills we can muster, and with God's help, deliver our children safely to the other side, where we can leave them safely to their new, wonderful, life changing, God-inspired adventures.
Amen