

David The Outlaw

GBH story

This week's election results in Israel have demonstrated a lot of indecisiveness, but also a definite set of longings. Regardless of which party comes to power, it is clear that the majority in Israel will favour a party that emphasises military action rather than peace talks. And whichever way the final result goes, when you look at the alternatives, they don't look good. And I suppose it is easy to sit from outside and condemn a nation that looks hungry for war, desperate for its enemies to be crushed. Easy to condemn a nation that now favours a right wing government that will deal harshly with its neighbours.

This evening we're looking at the ultimate national leader for Israel, the ultimate war-time leader, who did not seem particularly concerned with peace negotiations – or at least, did not seem concerned to honour those he had made. King David, the man after God's own heart.

After David had defeated Goliath, he became highly favoured in Israel, but attracted a growing bitterness from King Saul, Israel's first ever King. This bitterness continued to grow with every military success that David enjoyed against the Philistines. David's popularity grew – and people began to sing – well, Saul might have killed thousands, but David has killed tens of thousands. Eventually, the winsome warrior wins the admiration of Saul. But Saul's psycho-spiritual state deteriorated and resulted in several plots and attempts on David's life, forcing him into exile finally with the Philistines themselves. David attracted around himself a band of outlaws which grew from 400 to six hundred as the months progressed.

During this time David used every gift at his disposal (his charm, his cunning, his determination and his military experience) to transform this band of outlaws into the most effective fighting unit that Israel had ever experienced. (Probably we would imagine something like the French Foreign Legion – one of, if not the, world's deadliest fighting forces, traditionally comprised of unsavoury characters but forged into a highly disciplined and effective unit.) It enjoyed astonishing successes, as David pretended to the Philistine King to be attacking Israel, whilst all the time directing its energies to fighting the tribal allies of the Philistines, killing everyone they attacked so as to maintain this deception. Again, the merciless, cruel streak in David's character is undeniable and raises questions about the morality of the would-be King and the way that he perceived God to be at work.

His dependence upon the God of Israel was real enough, and this was a period from which many of our psalms find their poetic origins. But the question of how we account for the violence that was apparently required by God rears its head once again. Was God himself making immoral demands, are we witnessing David's tendency to assume that God will approve of his exploits or is the writer of the Biblical texts mistaken in attributing this conquests to God? Or are we witnessing here the struggles of a people in the process of discovering more and more of the character of God?

Perhaps the most fruitful way to look at this is to imagine yourself into the situation of those who lived in Palestine. The land did not belong to anyone. There was no permanent border. No national flag. There was just a beautiful land, and a lot of people that wanted to benefit from what it had to offer. But this beautiful land is where you live. It is where your family have lived and it's where you want your descendents to live. But you could not think like this, not in the Palestine of David's day – any more than you could today. There was no

security! There was no rule of international law. No united nations that would intervene, or perhaps just complain, when one nation decided to invade another. You live in the land, you believe it is the promised Land, where God has settled your people. But there's nothing stamped on the land to say it belongs to you. Might is right. This land will be inhabited by the strongest. The mightiest force gets to live here – at the moment it might be you – next week it might be someone else. If God wants you to stay, he gives you military might!

Before we who have never seen the face of war, are able to sit and condemn David for his bloodthirsty actions, before we are able to condemn the Israel who heralded this man as a hero, before we can condemn an Israel that favours military action – perhaps we should imagine what it is to live in the circumstances of Jewish people three thousand years ago.

If you were one of those people, what would your prayers sound like? If you were to write psalms what would they say? If you wrote hymns, and spoke about the deep longings of your heart – would they be about? If you could buy Christian paperbacks, what would they encourage? A better spiritual life? Success in the moral struggles that you face. Biblical self-help strategies for a closer walk with God? NO! Your hymns and your prayers and your longings would be strongly driven by desires about security, about military security, because without that – you're dead, and so are your family.

So, how do you feel, if you are Israel, and the Philistine forces are gathering beyond the hills? How do those hills look to you, every day? How does the landscape feel when you know it might be taken from you at any moment? And how would you feel now about David, who seems utterly incapable of anything other than astonishing military success, time after time after time?

David had been anointed King by Samuel. But he had not yet been enthroned as the King of Israel. So was he or was he not a king during his time in the wilderness? This ambiguity marks the time that David spent in the wilderness. There is something closely akin here to the Kingdom of God as expressed in the Gospels. Jesus is wandering round with a band of renegade followers. He has been anointed ('the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ...') but he has not yet been enthroned (on the cross.)

So when Jesus constantly declares that the Kingdom of God has come / the Kingdom of God is at hand, people could not help but be reminded of the wilderness phase of King David's life. It may be for this reason that when he approached Jerusalem (to become King) people were crying out for liberation from Rome at the hands of this Davidic King (hosannah to the Son of David).

The coming of God does not, and never has meant the end of the space time continuum. It simply refers to the time when Israel's God becomes King. And in the Gospels, that is something that has already happened. There is a future dimension to it, for sure, but the Kingdom has already been established with the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

The element of the now and not yet charges the story about David's wilderness years, and it charges the gospels with great expectations over what will take place when Jesus – out there in the wilderness of Galilee and Samaria, eventually comes to Jerusalem to claim his throne.

I have been asked, when reading with five year old Stefan, to ask him to summarise the books that he reads, to help him to understand and to enter into the stories that he reads. So, this week he summarises a famous book by explaining that it was about a grass man, a robot and a lion. He was, of course, talking about the Wizard of Oz. A grass man, a robot and a lion – the scarecrow, the tin man, and the lion. And the story is brilliant. Because the whole story is about a quest to see this wizard who will grant them what they desire. The cowardly lion wants courage, the brainless scarecrow wants a brain, the empty tin man wants a heart. And of course, the story shows that in their quest – each of these desires was granted before they got anywhere near the Wizard of Oz. They already had what they wanted – they just didn't realise it.

The Kingdom of God has already come, according to the Gospels, its coming is in the past tense. All we need to do is live as though it were true. This is why, throughout the Gospels, the question is not whether the kingdom of God will one day come. (If by the finger of God I cast out demons, then know that the kingdom of God has already come). The real question is whether we will see it? Time after time after time in the Gospels, references to the Kingdom of God are accompanied by references to seeing it! Seek ye first the kingdom of God; Joseph of Arimathea was looking for the Kingdom of God; There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God. At the centre of the Nazareth manifesto, in a chiasm which puts the climax at the centre instead of at the end – here, the ministry of Jesus is about opening the eyes of the blind. The Kingdom of God has come. What counts is whether we are able to live on the strength of that Kingdom.

Because for now, we remain in a wilderness. Militarily, economically, ecologically – anyone who does not see that the world is in a mess is wondering around with their eyes closed. And if its some kind of security that we want – then it eludes us! And where is the Kingdom of God? Living with the radical, structural uncertainty – don't we want the Kingdom of God to come?

According the Gospels, it already has. If only we had the eyes to see it! King David, did not simply think – well, I've been anointed King by Samuel! It's all in God's hands now! Today, I don't think that means that we go in search of security by military operations. The horrors that we see in Gaza and elsewhere are signs that we do still inhabit this wilderness, this mess. And doubtless, there are actions that we take today that future generations might consider morally reprehensible – blind spots even in our apparently evolved age.

Today we inhabit the wilderness, with all the beauty of the present, all the fear of the future, all the mess of our lives and the ugliness of our interactions. And right here, in this mess, Jesus comes to us, and says, "The Kingdom of God has arrived."