

David and Absalom

During the later years of David's reign, grievances towards the king and petty squabbles amongst his subjects were widespread. The charismatic nature of David's Kingship still left room for the possibility of other charismatic figures contesting him. And the question of royal succession loomed large. There was, as yet, no royal dynasty in Israel! What was to stop the next great charismatic leader from overpowering succeeding David.

In the end, it was David's son, Absalom who became the most serious challenge. Amnon, David's eldest son by a different mother, raped and humiliated Absalom's sister. After two years, David had taken no action against Amnon, and Absalom felt compelled to take the law into his own hands. He murdered Amnon in cold blood. And for this, he had to flee to Arameneia for several years until eventually finding forgiveness with David.

Absalom must have felt he was in the right. A crime that tore his heart and was dealt with so appallingly by David. How could you not feel justified in displacing David. Absalom spent some time plotting in court, then had himself proclaimed King in Hebron, and finally marched on Jerusalem with considerable force, forcing David to flee.

And so David runs from Jerusalem with his military units. And during that flight – poor old David – he writes this psalm. It is a beautiful psalm, well used throughout the history of the church. A psalm pleading for divine protection, a psalm affirming the importance of relying on God, a psalm which appeals for the well being of the King and the people. A psalm that inspires trust in God, over against all your enemies (who must therefore also be God's enemies!) And it is a beautiful, inspiring, poetic psalm – which arises from the King's failure to stand up for justice!

David had got himself into this mess through his own moral cowardice. Now this is not to say that David is a coward full stop. He had been a superb military leader and demonstrated enormous courage on the battlefield. But that does not give him some magical badge that makes him courageous in all aspects of his life. His failure to do anything about the atrocious behaviour of his own son was nothing short of cowardly.

At one level, of course, you can understand it! If your son, your firstborn son, did what David's son had done, you would be heart broken! How can you dish out the punishment your son deserves? Even despite what had been done. It takes a particular kind of courage to accept what your child has done. But this doesn't get David off the hook. Because, when Absalom did take the law into his own hands, it is Absalom who is severely punished by David and has to flee.

What kind of a leader for Israel is this? How dare this poet King write a psalm pleading for protection from Absalom, when it appears that Absalom had justice on his side? Doesn't this psalm read a little differently once you realise that it was only written because it's author had tolerated rape and left it to go unpunished? Read the psalm again, once you know what its real inspiration is: what are you left with? What lessons are you going to take from this psalm? "Act how you like, then assume that God will be on your side, because you are in charge!" Reading this psalm in context reveals awful truths about David, suggests that the psalm is inspired by something venomous, and casts a shadow over every psalm that David has ever written! And this is not to dishonour the text – these are questions that we are left with when we take the text as seriously as we are able to take it!

So, reading it in context means several things. It means first of all, that we picture David with his troops. His expeditionary forces have been annihilated. The outlook is not good. And you can imagine the kinds of things that soldiers might have been thinking if not saying! “David’s brought this on himself; and our chances are not good.” Somehow, the silver-haired silver-tongued warmongering hymn-writer, has to rally his troops.

I can’t help picturing Shakespeare’s Henry V, outnumbered six to one on the field of Agincourt, wondering how on earth he’s going to inspire his soldiers to fight well. And the product is one of the most celebrated portions of English literature. Well, David is in precisely this situation. What is he going to say that will inspire his men? And the result is what we know today as Psalm 3.

This was one of the break throughs we had when we read this psalm at Xchange. Suddenly, it reads rather differently. It doesn’t have to answer all the questions of remorse and self doubt, because that is not the purpose of this psalm. The purpose here is to acknowledge that for whatever reason, David’s kingdom is in a mess, for whatever reason, military hope seems futile.

But still, it doesn’t seem to get David off the hook. There might be *some* acknowledgement that maybe he was partially to blame for the situation he was in! But no – not a hint of repentance here. I don’t know what we’re supposed to do with this. Does David expect to go back to Jerusalem if he wins, does he expect to go back to being the same kind of King he was before?

Is he just asking God to bail him out of the mess that his own policy has got him into, simply so that he can go back carry on being the same? And isn’t there a parallel here with the way that the world’s financial powers are coping with the current economic crisis. Ah – we’ve got to get ourselves out of this mess that we’ve got ourselves into. And, like David, there is little recognition that we got ourselves into this mess. But we have to get ourselves out of it how? By carrying on the way that we always have, but doing it more carefully!!!

Same old economic mess, Same old David... What is there here that speaks of transformation, or hope, or justice? What is there, other than the demand that God endorse the injustice that got us into this mess? The Psalm, if read properly, demands that we ask these kinds of questions.

There are several routes we might take:

We could take this as a negative example. We could read it as a commentary on David’s life and character – rather like we might read some of the songs in Tolkein’s Lord of the Rings or something. But then, how can we make this song our own. How can we sing this song with any sense of legitimacy? It is perhaps, the kind of song we could imagine Adolf Hitler singing from the Eagle’s Nest... But what has this psalm got to do with us?

We could then, perhaps say that God is far less interested in the way that we get ourselves into a mess than he is in the way that we relate to him once we are in a mess. David knew well enough that God may well have cursed him – we know that from the way that the story is told in 2 Samuel. And there is a sense of honesty here in the text – the acknowledgement that every second of David’s life is dependant upon God – the knowledge that everything is in God’s hands.

Well, the story ends with military success for David – but he didn't experience any happiness from that success, we see no justice in the way that this episode comes to a conclusion. Absalom is killed, David is miserable. No happy endings for anyone. I think I heard my Dad speaking about war once – and he said, "It's not about who's right. It's about who's left!" And what is left after this civil war has torn across the holy land? Not much that we can take any comfort from!

The psalm doesn't even bring a happy ending. And yet it's such a great psalm as it reads in itself! But the question doesn't go away, what do we do with psalm 3 when we know the context in which it was written? How is it that the people of Israel were happy to sing this psalm over and over and over again?

All we can do I suppose, is try to hear this song as though we were one of David's soldiers. Your military situation is hopeless. You are surrounded. And your leader? Is God going to bless him? Has God forgotten him. It may seem to us that the psalm is a little ego-centric. But this is not quite true. David was an anointed King – not self appointed. He plays on his status as King to claim that God will answer him from Jerusalem. Whatever David has done, God is going to protect him because God has promised to protect him. And maybe, the best way to make sense of this psalm is simply as a rallying call to encourage the dejected soldiers. It's the ancient Jewish equivalent to a Winston Churchill speech – and in that sense, it seems to have done the job.

And when you are trying to encourage the troops, the last thing that you are going to do is reflect upon your self doubt, and the reasons why you don't deserve God's grace. That, would probably be the ego-centric thing to do, and the psalm would lose its function.

Much as I hate to admit this, and much as I am uncomfortable of the theology – it looks as though this psalm works to remind people in a hopeless situation, in a mess of their own making, that God has not forgotten them. And their salvation is not dependent upon any goodness of their own, but upon the status that God himself has conferred upon them. Whatever else David has done, God has made promises to David, and if David has broken those promises, God has not.

In the midst of a horrific situation, God – for some reason – has not let go of David. It does not seem fair – and I think it's fair to say that many of the things God does are not fair. We don't know the precise details about Absalom's rebellion, or how things turned out with his sister. It would be easier to fit the story into our theology if we had those details, but we don't – and all we are left with is a God who seems almost unjust in his commitment to someone who does not deserve it.

And then we look at our lives – and hope that the God we worship does not deal with us fairly, we hope that he does not deal with us as our sins deserve, and we hope for precisely this God, who might seem almost unjust in his commitment to us, who don't deserve it. And maybe it's only when we identify ourselves with David in his ugliest moments, in his sinfulness and in his shame, that we ...