

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (B): CCSY, 26 July 2009

Samuel 11:1-15; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

*David & Bathsheba: picking up the pieces...*

If only Uriah had slept with his wife!<sup>1</sup> You see, King David didn't want to have him killed: on learning that Bathsheba was pregnant he decided to bring her husband, Uriah the Hittite, back from the front line to Jerusalem on some pretext, and send him home to Bathsheba. Nine months later, everyone would assume the child was Uriah's – a timely blessing from this unexpected interlude of R&R.

A cunning plan. Only, Uriah doesn't sleep with his wife. He camps out at David's place. And when the king asks him why he did not go down to his house – nudge nudge, wink wink – Uriah is almost affronted: 'You didn't honestly expect me to eat and drink and lie with my wife when the rest of your troops are roughing it out there to protect the ark of the covenant, did you?!' Uriah's loyalty is as unswerving as David's treachery.

After this unguarded moment of royal indulgence, it seems there is no way out for the king except deeper into the abyss. Like Macbeth, he is "in blood stepped so far that...returning were as tedious as to go o'er." (III.v) On returning to duty, David has Uriah deliver a letter to his commanding officer which seals his own fate. Irony turns to pathos as, in the next battle, those for whose sake Uriah refused the comforts of home set him up as a sitting duck, and leave him to die.

This is no crime of passion – at least, not primarily. For it is clearly David's first intention that Bathsheba remain Uriah's wife, and her child be regarded as his. No, David has Uriah rubbed out because Uriah's faithfulness has left this supposedly 'just king' (2 Samuel 8:15) with no other means of concealing his betrayal. Bathsheba becomes David's wife only by default – a necessary component of this elaborate and deadly right-royal cover-up.

David's desire for Bathsheba is symptomatic of a deeper problem: hubris. David abuses his power. He sends others off to fight his wars while he naps late into the afternoon. His royal position thus affords him both the opportunity and the authority to summon another man's wife to his bed. The implicit suggestion that Bathsheba is somehow Uriah's property is, no doubt, distasteful to us. But when the prophet, Nathan, appears in the next chapter to convict the king, he presents his case in just these terms. He tells David a parable about a rich man with vast flocks and herds who comes and takes a poor man's only lamb in order to feed his guests. Mortified, David does not escape the loop of disaster. From this point on his rule will be marred by suffering and struggle.

Hubris, pathos, irony, intrigue, flawed heroes. Little wonder, then, that this story is mined as raw material by popular culture. I can't read this text without hearing Jeff Buckley's beautiful rendering of the Leonard Cohen song *Hallelujah*: 'Well your faith was strong but you needed proof, you saw her bathing on the roof, her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you.' Hollywood has also had a go at David and Bathsheba, most famously in Henry King's 1951 movie of the same name starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward – one for our next Parish film night, perhaps!

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<sup>1</sup> It is a truism that there is no such thing as an original sermon – not least because, in an important sense, the Church has only one sermon: Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:23a). The opening sentence (only) here was used by a presenter, whose name regrettably escapes me, from the United Methodist tradition in the USA at the Trinity College Theological School's 'School of preaching' in her sermon on 2 Sam 11:1-15 in 1999 or 2000. My own reading of the Davidic narrative cycle has been enriched and informed by that of J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 120-49.

But this story hardly strikes us as raw material for Scripture, the word of God?! What is it doing in the Bible? Is it a cautionary tale, warning readers away from the slippery slope of lies and lust? Or is it an example of the ‘court intrigue’ genre (the ‘Mills and Boon’ of its day), which has crept into the canon of Scripture? Well, yes, at one level it’s a good bodice-ripper, but what are we to make of it as a chapter in the wider drama of God’s relationship with Israel, and indeed with us?

God seems strangely distant from David’s story at this point, neither intervening to prevent him from stuffing things up, nor protecting the anointed king from the catastrophic consequences of his actions.

But God does not abandon David to the mess of his life. Somehow the broken pieces are gathered up, and a new wholeness emerges. Out of David’s compromised union with Bathsheba issues both suffering – Uriah and their first child die – and wisdom, with the birth of Solomon.

And, at the start of Matthew’s gospel, as he draws Jesus’ family tree, the evangelist drags this skeleton (along with several others) from the biblical closet: “David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam,” and so it goes on until we get to “Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.” (See Matthew 1:6b, 16)

God is never absent from the stormy chaos of David’s life. Indeed Matthew wants us to know that God is made present in human flesh precisely out of that strife. The story of David and Bathsheba, and countless like it, is biblical literature because it’s so human. In big and small ways the movie makers, the song writers, and we ourselves can recognise the desperation of David to cover his own tracks, the poignancy of Uriah’s misplaced trust and the weakness of those who let him die because orders are orders – these frail and flawed biblical characters, who find and lose and find God: the God who is always there gathering up the broken pieces, so that nothing may be lost, nothing wasted.

To this Eucharist we bring our own insatiable hungers and drivenness: complex creatures with tremendous capacity for good and for harm, at once powerful and pathetic, noble and self-seeking. And in the blessing and distribution of these meagre, yet more than sufficient fragments, the broken pieces of our lives are gathered up into the same human and divine story which features David and Bathsheba, Uriah the Hittite, one Jesus of Nazareth, and you and me, together lurching towards an unlikely wholeness: that ‘new and living way’ of our first hymn (*Together in Song 254*). So may we discover that in God’s bountiful economy nothing is wasted, nothing lost.

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