

**Sermon for Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> July 2021 (Trinity 8) 'King David and the tragic flaw'**  
from Fr. Mike.

- [2 Sam 11.1-15](#) \* **Please read the text on the back page first (p.6)**
- Psalm 14
- Ephesians 3.14-21; Mark 6.1-21

For the past several months, I have been doing battle with a persistent spider in church. At first, the spider insisted on building a web right across the entrance of priest porch door. Every time I stepped out to greet people after the Thursday Mass I ran smack into the spider's web. All the way to the front gates of the churchyard, I would wipe my face and head trying to get it off. The next week, the same thing happened. Finally, the spider gave up on that porch. I think he decided it was no use. I used that door too often for it to become an effective spider web. Then, the spider moved to the baptistry door. I disturbed the web less, but still too much. At least once a week, I found myself wiping my face and head to get the sticky spider web off. At long last, the spider gave up on that location too. He merely moved to the space by the north door! This was an especially determined spider. But finally, I think he has given up and gone elsewhere.

The image of a spider's web is an appropriate one regarding King David's famous sin. For David, one sin led to a web of deceit and sin, and it created a further web of impact that lasted for generations in his family.

### **A tragic flaw**

Today we deal with the tragic flaw of David. In Greek literature, it seems their favourite kind of literature was the tragedies in which the hero often had a tragic flaw (usually hubris or pride).

Aristotle was one of the first to describe the tragic flaw in the character of the protagonist of a tragedy (often a successful king or leader) which brings ruin or sorrow. It was often something about them that was the 'tragic flaw' leading to their eventual downfall.

I find it interesting that people enjoy watching such tragedies. There may be several reasons why we enjoy them. Sometimes we enjoy watching tragic figures because we can learn from them. That is certainly the reason this kind of story is in the Bible.

Quite frankly, this is an embarrassing story. It is not the kind of story that I want to address on a Sunday. I think some people enjoy tragedies for the wrong reason. Sometimes they enjoy the destruction of others. In recent history our prime minister was challenged and embarrassed. One lady I knew said with glee, "I'm glad! I hope they send him to prison forever!" I was shocked by such an attitude about the tragedy of another person. Sometimes I think we enjoy watching someone else fail. However, that is not the reason this story is in the Bible. This story is here that we might see ourselves in David, and potentially see the same kind of tendencies in us. We should not enjoy this story, although we could learn from it.

Noteworthy that the Bible has such a tragic story, especially about someone so well-respected as King David. This story is told with an unflinching presentation, making no excuses, and hiding none of the sordid details. David, in the space of fifteen verses, breaks at least three of the Ten Commandments in a cold and calculated fashion: you shall not covet your neighbour's wife; you shall not commit adultery; and you shall not murder.

Scripture makes no attempt to put a spin on David's sin - no excuses are given. The story is told, remember, so that we might see ourselves and learn from David's mistake.

As this is a story set in the context of the violence of war, I suppose we should not be surprised to find a story of sexual violence in such a setting. But what is David doing at home? His army was out laying siege, while David lounges at home. Perhaps David has lost interest in leading armies to battle. They said that David "had killed his tens of thousands," so maybe he is weary of warfare. Some have suggested that he is too valuable as king to go on such campaigns. Perhaps David was waiting for the final breakthrough of the city (sieges could take months and even years) and there was little for important kings to do in the meantime.

Soldiers were digging trenches, building ladders, or even preparing a battering ram. Therefore, plenty of time for the king to go home and wait in luxury for the final push.

As David idly paces on the rooftop, he spies a **'very beautiful'** (v.2) woman at her bath. At this point, David had not sinned. Later, he decided to put his foot on a slippery slope (**'David sent and inquired after the woman'**) and immediately becomes entangled in this life-changing spider's web.

I think it is a very important part of the story that David did not know the identity of this woman (Bathsheba). He had no previous relationship with her. There were no genuine emotions toward her. He did not love or care for her, or what she might think about him. He had power. He was the king. Notice the word **'take'** repeated again and again... This act of adultery is described in too few words. There is no mention of the motivations, emotions, or feelings.

There were two people involved, yet Bathsheba is never held responsible for this action. The Bible very clearly places all of the moral responsibility upon David. However, this has not prevented people through the ages from speculating about Bathsheba. Some have said she was a flirt or that she had seduced David. This is only suggested as an attempt to excuse David's behaviour.

In Joseph Heller's novel on David, he has Bathsheba say, "I made up my mind to meet you. A king and all that too – who could resist? So, I began bathing on my roof every evening to attract you." These are poor attempts to excuse King David's behaviour by implying, "She asked for it."

In a 1985 film, 'King David', we find another suggested justification. Bathsheba reveals to a shocked David that Uriah is an abusive husband, thus giving David a noble motive for the act of murder and the rescue of an abused woman. **But look at the actual text!** Scripture does not involve this woman at all in the decision for this action. This is not a love story. This is not a relationship. David even *has to ask this woman's name*, and in a few minutes, the sinful deed is done.

I may shock you here, but this was not just adultery. This is very clearly a rape. It was abuse of the absolute power enjoyed by the king. In these circumstances,

Bathsheba had no choice in the matter. This was coercion, plain and simple. There was no way on earth she could refuse the king, and David was not the kind of man who would take “No” for an answer. David exercised the power of his position to satisfy his lust for a beautiful woman. Scripture makes clear that Bathsheba did not bear responsibility for this action. Only David is held accountable. Furthermore, it almost appears that she is a non-person. Bathsheba is identified primarily by her ties to father and husband. She is not called by her own name until after the death of the child she conceives with David - called only **“the wife of Uriah”** or **“the woman.”** The moral responsibility lies clearly with David.

This story of royal lust is further complicated when she tells David **‘I am with child’** (v.5) propelling the story into a new and tragic dimension. In response, David launches a cover-up, intending to get Uriah to sleep with his wife so that he might appear to be the child’s father - **‘Go down to your house, and wash your feet’** (v.6).

David’s euphemism (‘wash your feet’) was very clear to Uriah, although his sense of solidarity with those facing hardship in battle precluded his being able to enjoy even one night’s respite with his wife (as in many ancient cultures, sexual intercourse rendered a person ritually impure in ancient Israel, and David’s warriors also refrained from contact with women while on military campaigns).

The next day, David learns that Uriah (who clearly believed the current pandemic rhetoric ‘we are all in this together’) did not go to his house because he considered it wrong to take a comfortable option while his men must **‘abide in tents’** (v.11). Faced with Uriah’s integrity, David attempts to undermine Uriah’s resolve through a drunken palace feast (**‘and he made him drunk’**) but Uriah still did not go home afterwards, choosing instead to sleep in the servant quarters. We cannot help but notice the contrast between David (the stay-at-home husband) and Uriah (the man of real integrity) who has been away fighting the king’s battles, and even now, will not betray his comrades in arms.

In desperation, David determines to murder Uriah in battle, where the murder will hopefully be disguised as a battle casualty. It is chilling how easily the cover up plan

shifts to a murder plot. In bitter irony, Uriah must carry the cruel order for his own death (v.14).

In just fourteen verses, the story is told. We now know the facts, and it will not be until next week's text that we find Nathan confronting David and his genuine repentance. It is there that we will see the long-term consequences in his family.

### **Lessons identified or lessons learned?**

First, we see the slippery slope (or spider's web?) of sin. When David was caught in one part of the web, the more he twisted and turned, the more he became entangled.

This story began with a look, then a longer look, then lust, then adultery and rape, then deception and cover-up, and finally in murder. At any point, David could have stopped this story and mitigated the damage; But no, he slid all the way to murder.

Perhaps David fell into the trap of wondering how his actions could be so wrong if they felt so right? He was king. It was what *he wanted* to do. He was entitled. He felt this was a manageable episode. Indeed, it may not have been much of a story **until things slipped out of his control**. He could neither control Bathsheba's pregnancy (despite being a powerful and successful king) nor Uriah's behaviour. Matters were out of his control and spiralled into increasingly worse sins as a result of his chosen behaviour.

Which brings up the doorway problem of sin. (Remember that David's lust turned into adultery, which became deceit, which graduated into murder). He spiralled steadily downward until he finally hit rock-bottom. This incident starts a tragic path for the house of David that will include episodes of rape, murder, and rebellion.

David is a famous king with a tragic flaw. His story is told with great frankness in the Bible. This lack of sugar-coating is a warning to all of us. We must beware. **There, but for the grace of God, go all of us. Amen!**

Fr. Mike, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2021 (Trinity 8)

And it came to pass, after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. But David tarried still at Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.

<sup>3</sup> And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?

<sup>4</sup> And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness: and she returned unto her house.

<sup>5</sup> And the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child.

<sup>6</sup> And David sent to Joab, saying, Send me Uriah the Hittite. And Joab sent Uriah to David.

<sup>7</sup> And when Uriah was come unto him, David demanded of him how Joab did, and how the people did, and how the war prospered.

<sup>8</sup> And David said to Uriah, Go down to thy house, and wash thy feet. And Uriah departed out of the king's house, and there followed him a mess of meat from the king.

<sup>9</sup> But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and went not down to his house.

<sup>10</sup> And when they had told David, saying, Uriah went not down unto his house, David said unto Uriah, Camest thou not from thy journey? why then didst thou not go down unto thine house?

<sup>11</sup> And Uriah said unto David, The ark, and Israel, and Judah, abide in tents; and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into mine house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? as thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, I will not do this thing.

<sup>12</sup> And David said to Uriah, Tarry here to day also, and to morrow I will let thee depart. So Uriah abode in Jerusalem that day, and the morrow.

<sup>13</sup> And when David had called him, he did eat and drink before him; and he made him drunk: and at even he went out to lie on his bed with the servants of his lord, but went not down to his house.

<sup>14</sup> And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.

<sup>15</sup> And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.