

David and Absalom



Sermon given by the Rev. Edward Prebble on 13th August 2006

First lesson: II Samuel 18: 5-9, 15, 31-33.

The story of David and Absalom is a wonderful one – a bit too long to read in church, so today we only have some excerpts from the last chapter. It is a tragic story, about the failure of parents, and the failure of children to deal with disillusionment. Like so many of the stories in Samuel and Kings, it has a timeless quality – we can put ourselves in the story so easily.

If I were to ask this congregation, “Please put your hand up if you have children who don’t go to church as often as you do,” I know that nearly everyone would have their hands up. Something has happened between the generations that is quite remarkable. We may be hugely proud of our children’s achievements, and we may even be proud of the values that we have managed to impart to them, but somehow we have failed to train them to express those values the way we do.

I would go so far as to suggest that there is a kind of corporate grief and guilt about the absence of those younger than ourselves. People ask me what I am planning to do about the lack of young people in our church, as if they think I can solve it, where the only thing that will work is if we can all figure out how to communicate more effectively to our own children. The risk there of course is that our children may convince us that being here is not the most important thing for them to be doing).

But what’s that got to do with David and Absalom?

Well, David, as we know, had a large number of wives and a larger number of concubines. That had the inevitable result of a very large number of children – all siblings and half-siblings. The bible in several places describes these children in very complimentary terms – very fine looking, attractive, talented young people.

The oldest was a chap called Amnon. He took a shine to his half-sister, Tamar. In a story worthy of the best script-writers of *The Sopranos*, or the worst writers of *Days of our Lives*, Amnon managed to trick Tamar into being alone with him, and he raped her. He

even managed to trick his father into assisting with the intrigue. (A story not often told at Sunday School.)

Everyone comes out of this story badly, but the person who comes out least badly is Tamar's brother, Absalom. He can be described as someone who did all the wrong things, for all the right reasons. Absalom was understandably very distressed by Amnon's behaviour and his sister's disgrace, so he did the obvious thing, and complained to Daddy.

And what did David do? Nothing.

Because Amnon was his firstborn, he wasn't sure what to do, so did nothing.

It took Absalom two years to figure out what he could do about it himself. In the next episode of the soap opera, he tricked Amnon into a trap and had him murdered. That was not acceptable behaviour in the family (though apparently incest and rape were) so Absalom had to run away.

What did David do? Nothing, except to grieve about Amnon. It was three years before David could inch his way back into favour, and finally he was forgiven and readmitted to the court.

That would have been the end of an obscure little story, except that Absalom was a very gifted young man, with a strong sense of the calling that had come to David's family. David at this time seems to be totally occupied with building a palace, and keeping order in the harem – very little energy seems to have been devoted to the work he was there to do - to look out for the needs of the poor, the widows, the orphans, the strangers. Absalom seems to have calculated that if Dad is not going to do his job, then let's see what I can do myself.

So what Absalom did was to go to the main gate of Jerusalem, and set up a sort of stall, a bit like Lucy's stall in the Peanuts cartoons, with its sign "The Psychiatrist is In/Out". There people could come to him with their problems – an argument with their neighbour, a complaint about their landlord, or whatever, and Absalom would see what he could do about it. It was a bit like our modern MP's, running their Electorate Surgeries, and Absalom was very good at it.

Before long the queues at Absalom's stall were huge, and people were singing his praises throughout the kingdom. They began to suggest that this young man would make a better king than his dad, and the more ambitious among them said, well why wait – let's make him king now.

And what did David do? Nothing again. Decisive action at even this point could have averted a crisis, but he let things get out of control.

Success went to Absalom's head, and he thought it might be a good idea to work his way through his father's concubines. He allowed himself to be proclaimed King, and soon had

the following of the 10 northern tribes, leaving David with only the two tribes of Judah, his old power base. This was the worst political crisis of David's reign. The inevitable happened, and there had to be a confrontation.

David elected not to go into battle himself, a rather strange decision for someone with a great background as a military strategist. His one instruction to his generals was to save Absalom's life.

Well, the battle happened, and it was a decisive victory for David's troops. Some 20,000 people died, mostly on Absalom's side. Absalom attempted to escape, riding on his mule. (It may be significant that Absalom, the champion of the poor and needy was mounted, not on a horse, but on the beast of burden, as was Solomon decisively a few chapters later, and Jesus 1000 years later). Unfortunately, he became entangled in a tree, and found himself hanging by his hair. Joab, David's commander, ignored his instructions, and considered that a lot of problems would be solved by Absalom's demise, so threw spears at Absalom and killed him.

So when the news was brought to David, it was like one of those "Do you want the good news or the bad news?" jokes. The crisis was over, and David's rule was again secure. But 20,000 of his subjects were dead, and in particular Absalom was no more. David ignored the success of his troops, and their need to celebrate; he even ignored the corporate grief of so many slaughtered Israelites. All he could think about was his pain over Absalom. He took to his bed and was there for some weeks, crying out "Oh Absalom, Absalom – if only it had been me, o my son Absalom".

But it was too late by then, wasn't it? Guilt is such a wasted emotion, as there was nothing he could do, and nothing anyone else could do to comfort him. Why hadn't he listened to his son about the rape of his daughter? Why hadn't he been more creative at the murder of Amnon? Why hadn't he gone down to Absalom's booth and helped him with his counselling work? After all it was really David's work that Absalom was doing. Above all, why didn't he just listen?

So often that is what is wrong. Instead of feeling grief at our failure as parents, the best response is to listen to them. They probably will tell us what is the problem, even if it is not what we want to hear. And if we want to know what we as a church should be doing, we can do a heck of a lot worse than listen to the opinions of our own children and grandchildren. If anyone here were to take our parish magazine and The Pulse newsletter to your children, you might be interested in their responses. One of my children described The Pulse as the most exciting thing published by any church ever!

It is likely that if we listen to our children and grandchildren talking about our church, and others like it, their comments will have very little to do with what we do here on a Sunday morning. They are much more likely to think about the issues that upset Absalom – questions of injustice, or our failure to tend to the needy around us.

A very wise person once said to me (I was about 25 at the time) that a crucial part of becoming an adult is learning to forgive our parents for their failures. With a very few distressing exceptions, all of us mean very well, and try hard. But we all have shortcomings and mistakes. We can either be consumed with guilt, or we can learn to forgive ourselves and move on. And the first step towards that is usually to listen.