

# Absalom's rebellion by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> August 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: 2 Samuel 18:1-2,5-9,15,24-33

Year B Track 1, Proper 14

(Lectionary reading for Track 1, Proper 14 has verses 3-9,15,31-33)

## Introduction



I wonder what you think of when you see this poppy? Of course, you immediately recognise it as a paper copy of the poppies that grew on the battlefields of Flanders, as a symbol of the blood shed by millions of soldiers and civilians in the conflict ironically known as “the Great War”.

On Friday, George and I went to see the play *Warhorse*. If you've not seen the play or the film, it's based on a novel for children about the First World War, and in it the author, Michael Morpurgo, presents a view of the war through the eyes of a horse, and of the humans who come into contact with this horse. It shows that war isn't just about which country wins and which loses: it's about lives that are lost, hopes that are dashed, families and villages that are devastated, all because human beings cannot tame their demons of greed, selfishness and anger. The decisions of Kaiser and King lead to the suffering of millions, both people and animals.

The play illustrates this theme through the eyes of a horse. Today's reading from the Bible illustrates it through the eyes of one family, and in particular through the eyes of its central character, King David.

For any of you who've had the misfortune to miss the sermons of recent weeks, let me summarise the story so far. God calls Samuel while a child to be his prophet, and it falls to him to answer the people's demand to have a king. He anoints Saul, but when Saul fails to obey God, David is anointed as his successor.

David's trust in God is shown through his battle with Goliath, and in due course he becomes king, unites the 12 tribes, and brings the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, which he has established as his capital. God makes a covenant with David, but after David is established and successful he becomes complacent, abuses his power to sleep with the wife of one of his soldiers, and eventually tries to cover up his sin by having her husband effectively murdered in battle. He is confronted by the prophet Nathan, who exposes the severity of his crimes through a parable about a rich man stealing a poor man's only lamb.

Although David is repentant and receives forgiveness, Nathan prophesies that his sin will have consequences. Not only does the child that has been conceived through this adulterous union die, but David is told that trouble will arise for him from within his own family. That was last week's instalment in 2 Samuel 12. Since last week, the prophecy has come true in chapters 13 to 17, resulting in a civil war where David's favourite son Absalom wins over the people, forcing David to flee Jerusalem. In today's reading we hear the outcome of that conflict – Absalom is slain in battle, and David is heartbroken.

'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!' (2 Sam 18:33)

Like the story of *Warhorse*, the story of the latter part of David's rule as king of Israel illustrates how greed, selfishness and anger bring death and destruction to many. David grieves for Absalom,

but how many mothers and fathers were also grieving over sons who did not return from this war? Did you notice how many people were killed in the battle? 20,000. And how might God have been grieving over the king he had described as “a man after his own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14)?

### **Where did David go wrong?**

There is no doubt, when we read about the earlier years of David's life, that his heart was indeed with God. Through “many dangers, toils and snares” he learned to trust God. On two occasions while fleeing from Saul, who was trying to kill him, David showed his integrity by rejecting the opportunity to kill his enemy. He made sure his parents were safe, and inspired the loyalty of his followers. Having made Jerusalem his capital, he brought the ark of the covenant there to ensure that God was at the centre of the nation's life.

But David's greatest weakness was in his family life. David had an eye for the ladies, and even while on the run from Saul, David acquired several wives, and it seems that with all the wars he was waging with neighbouring nations he neglected his role as a father to his many children. His love of God does not seem to have been passed on to his sons. The seeds of Absalom's rebellion can be found in the incident of Amnon's rape of Tamar and David's response to it, which you can read for yourself in I Samuel 13. Let me take a few moments to summarise this story.

David's eldest son, Amnon, becomes infatuated with his beautiful half-sister Tamar, who shares a mother with David's son Absalom. Amnon tricks Tamar and then rapes her. As if the horror of rape is not enough, Tamar is now, from the point of view of the culture of the day, “used goods”, with her marriage prospects in tatters.

What is David's response to the rape of his daughter by his son?

When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn. (2 Sam 13:21)

Absalom, Tamar's full brother, says nothing, but he is consumed with anger, and after 2 years murders Amnon. He flees, and although after 3 years he is allowed back to Jerusalem, his relationship with his father is permanently strained. Although David still loves Absalom deeply, his failure to address the injustice and hurt caused by the incident of Tamar's rape compounds the alienation of Absalom, who despises his father and determines to seize the throne for himself, which he successfully does, by undermining his father's reputation and ingratiating himself over a period of time into the affections of the people. King David flees before Absalom's approaching army, and Absalom walks into Jerusalem unopposed. For those who like graphic detail, his first action of defiance is to erect a tent on the roof of the palace, in which he publicly has sex with David's 10 concubines who have been left in charge of the palace. There are echoes in the ways sexual violence is used as a weapon of war in today's conflicts.

It is ironical that David's nemesis is his own son, his beloved Absalom. His failures as a father come home to roost. Moreover, his own lack of sexual moderation is copied by his sons. Years before, David thought that his adultery with Bathsheba was a private matter. He saw her, he desired her, he slept with her, it was over. But it wasn't. No man is an island. Everything in this world is connected in some way with everything else. Sin is never a private matter.

In 1961 a meteorology professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Edward Lorenz, suggested that the flap of a butterfly's wings might ultimately cause a tornado. “The Butterfly Effect”, as this came to be known, has become the basis for a significant breakthrough in science's understanding of how the universe works – it's called chaos theory.

One of the biggest mistakes of our individualistic culture is to think that the most important thing is individual freedom. Individuals should be free to express themselves with the minimum of interference or disapproval from society. Over the past 50 or 60 years old social norms have been

discarded, and everything has been redefined in terms of individual choice – ranging from which washing powder we choose, to how we express ourselves sexually.

At a corporate level, selling goods and making a profit was all that mattered. On the plus side, companies are now expected to show corporate responsibility, the Fairtrade movement has grown enormously and TV programmes like *Blue Planet 2* have raised our awareness of plastic pollution, but there is still far too little pressure from governments or society to ensure that those who produce cocoa in West Africa and those who sew clothes in Bangladesh are treated with justice and dignity, or that all packaging is justified, necessary and environmentally friendly. Gambling has been deregulated with little thought for the thousands of problem gamblers, including children, who are now its victims. Internet companies have taken over our lives with games that are designed to be addictive, and social media platforms that are an easy vehicle for sexual exploitation and the promotion of extremist views and addictive pornography. Personally, I think that justifying all this in the name of personal choice is no consolation to the families whose lives have been blighted by these social evils.

The story of David shows how the one person's arrogance and selfishness can have massive repercussions. In spite of David's integrity and faithfulness in his early career, his poor parenting and even worse personal example in the area of sex had repercussions that nearly cost him his kingdom. In the process, many people who had no personal connection with his family were dragged into a civil war and lost their lives.

As we commemorate the end of the First World War this November, history tells us that the hopes that such conflict would never again mar the face of the earth were not realised. It takes more than hope and good intentions to deal with the fallenness of humanity. To use a simple aphorism, "the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart". We have to stop excusing selfishness and greed in the name of freedom and choice, and start dealing with the problem where it resides – in our hearts.

A brief survey of the history of the human race does not, in fact, inspire me with any confidence in our ability to solve the inherent problem of sin. All I can say, in the face of the continuing story of violence, injustice and exploitation, is "thank God for Jesus!"



Let me finish with the paper poppy, the symbol of the sacrifice of millions in many wars. This poppy reminds us of the consequences of human selfishness, arrogance and folly, the suffering, loss and pain which we cause to one another.

But here I have another poppy, stuck to a wooden cross. It reminds me of another man whose blood was shed on a cross for our freedom – not the freedom to live our lives selfishly, but freedom from the slavery of sin, the freedom of forgiveness, of healing and of reconciliation. As we come to his altar this morning, to receive the symbols of his body and blood, let us come in repentance for our own part in the tragedy of the human race, and receive the plentiful forgiveness which comes from the blood that he shed for us.



Just as one act of sin can affect many people, so can one act of kindness or unselfishness, one decision to put Jesus at the centre of our lives instead of ourselves. Jesus' death, once for all on the cross, has changed millions of lives for good. May our prayer today be that we would become like Jesus, agents of God's peace and healing for the world. May our small actions and decisions for God be the seeds of his kingdom that will bring a harvest of righteousness, peace and love. Amen.