

Sermon at St Andrew's, 5 Aug. 2018.

Readings: 2 Sam. 11:26—12:13; John 6:24-35

Many men have committed adultery, and some have murdered for it. But there is something special about David's crimes. Just this: David was the king. What he did he was able to do because he was powerful, and he was willing to misuse his power, as so many powerful men (and a few women) have done through history. He sent a message to a married woman commanding her to come to him. When she came, she went to bed with him. Many people have assumed that she did so willingly. I doubt it, because you don't say no to the king however much you want to, and recent experience since the revelations about Harvey Weinstein, with the #MeToo movement, shows that a man, and especially a powerful man, can usually have his way with a woman whatever her wishes. And then David was able to get Uriah killed because he was the king, and he could send orders to his general which he obeyed if he knew what was good for him.

So when the Lord sends Nathan to confront David with what he has done, Nathan is not faced with any ordinary job of preacherly denunciation. He has to tell *the king* where he has gone wrong, a king who has already shown that he has no compunction about killing when he thinks he needs to. Nathan needs the courage of a lion and the boldness of a Luther. He can do it because God has commanded him and God gives him strength.

But what God asks of Nathan he also asks of his Church from time to time. One of the reasons why the Church exists in the world is to challenge wrongdoing in high places—and it can be dangerous. The Quakers have a word for it: they call it 'speaking truth to power'. The phrase has been taken up by others in course of time. Speaking truth to power. And some church leaders have ended up like Uriah for doing it.

When Oscar Romero was made Archbishop of San Salvador he was thought to be a sound conservative who wouldn't rock the boat. But when he realised how the government and the powerful families were treating El Salvador's poor, making them live in misery so that they themselves could live in comfort, and how that had led to the revolt and the guerrilla campaign, and all the suffering that that had caused, he could not keep silent. He had to speak out, as Nathan had to speak out, because he had a word from God, because he had a truth which he had to speak to power. And the death squads lay in wait for him and gunned him down in his own cathedral. Speaking truth to power is not comfortable and is sometimes dangerous. But it is always necessary.

Perhaps you are thinking that that is not something that you will ever be called on to do. You don't have access to powerful people, you're not able to speak to them. The fact is that nowadays, if you have access to the internet, speaking truth to power is a shade too easy. If a so-called 'petition' from one of a dozen campaigning organisations lands in my inbox, a click on a button, or at most writing in my name and email address, sends my heartfelt plea

about a scandal I've only just heard of winging its way to some minister, or probably only their secretary.

But that doesn't mean that elsewhere in the world there may not be people seriously risking their lives to speak truth to power. Think only of the unarmed protesters shot in Harare the other day. They may not have known what the truth was, but they were gunned down simply for protesting. (While in China hundreds of people critical of the official line have been arrested, disappeared or prevented from communicating.)

Speaking truth to power is my first point—I have another three.

Now let's look at how Nathan carries out his commission. He starts by telling a story. It's such a good story that David thinks it's true, and bursts out in anger, condemning himself, as he shortly realises. Nathan traps him into condemning himself by putting what he has to say in a way which makes utter sense, a simple story which even a child could understand, but which conceals the bleak truth just under the surface. And this is how Jesus also taught. When he says 'My Father gives you the true bread from heaven', it is a strange picture, but one which captures the imagination. And just under the surface of this strange picture is the truth of Jesus himself, who keeps us going spiritually as bread keeps us going physically.

It is important whenever we talk about serious things, about God, about Christ, about the false acts of power, that we should speak in a way which people can catch on to. They don't necessarily have to understand straight away. David thought he understood what Nathan was saying, but he didn't, not until Nathan said 'You are the man!' What matters is that they should have something to think about, even if they can't at once grasp the full meaning. Some of the speakers on Thought for the Day on Radio 4 in the morning are able to do this, but most can't. If you are a regular listener, you will be able to sort out which is which.

So there is the second point: speaking to catch the imagination.

Now, for our third point we need to move on to see how Nathan follows through on his dramatic denunciation, 'You are the man!' 'Why have you despised the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight?... Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house.' What David has to learn is that he cannot commit adultery and murder and get away with it. In fact, to a remarkable extent he does get away with it, considering that the normal penalty for murder (and adultery) was death. But he might have found a straightforward death sentence easier to bear than what actually happens. The son Bathsheba has borne him dies. His eldest son rapes David's daughter, his half-sister, and he is then murdered in revenge by the daughter's full brother. This son Absalom then rebels against David, drives him out of Jerusalem, and seizes his palace, including his concubines. When David rallies his forces Absalom is defeated and killed, to David's deep grief.

David himself is spared, but there is no cheap grace. The judgment of God is a reality. It applies to individuals; it applies also to peoples. We can't go on running society in a way which defies God's intention for us without any consequences. If we allow managers of big companies to earn 300 times what their average worker earns, there will be a price to pay, in hatred and envy and strife, in the tearing apart of our social fabric. If we go on pouring greenhouse gases into the atmosphere to satisfy our short-sighted desires, the world may literally become too hot to hold us. Why do we think we alone of all generations of humankind are immune to the natural law which the Bible spells out so implacably and which we have seen working so often?

The 'amazing grace' of which the hymn writer speaks is not amazing because it means no punishment. It is amazing because it means sinful men and women are reconciled to the holy God. But the reconciliation doesn't mean we can necessarily escape the natural consequences of what we have done. We may have to bear them to the end of our days.

So our third point is that judgement is necessary. But the fourth point is the other side of that. David hears Nathan out, and then he responds simply and sincerely, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' He simply recognises that he has done wrong. Nothing more than that. But that is enough. Enough to transform the situation: for Nathan's response is: 'Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die.' David's sin led to death, not just Uriah's but many people's. His repentance opens the way to life.

Of course, it is not David himself who gives life by repenting. He is a rank sinner, who deals in death, and however repentant he is he is never going to deal in life, It is God who gives life, it is God who is merciful, and it is his mercy that gives life. It is 'the bread which comes down from heaven' which gives life to the world, not any bread that we bake. But because David recognises that he has sinned, he is simply able to receive God's mercy. And that makes all the difference.

Everyone knows that the one word politicians can't bring themselves to say is sorry, unless it's in a sentence like 'I'm sorry that what I said may have been misconstrued', or 'I'm sorry for any offence that may have been caused.' But it's not only politicians. If you are ever involved in a car accident, you will find, even if you think you were to blame, that your insurance company will tell you not to admit it. Their bottom line is more important than common decency. Of course saying sorry can be hard. We all have our pride, and admitting we were wrong is a severe blow to our pride. It makes us open and vulnerable. But just for that reason it can be immensely creative. It can end a moral logjam. If two people are at loggerheads and neither will admit they were wrong, nothing can happen. It is stalemate, it is moral death. Once one of them admits it, life can start again. It's so simple, and so difficult.

The truth of this was shown in a remarkable way in South Africa by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which Archbishop Desmond Tutu presided over. For forty years or more the races had been in bitter conflict, the whites under the National Party government excluding all other races from political

power and repressing all attempts to resist, often with violence and murder and torture. And there had been atrocities on the other side too. There could have been endless trials and reprisals. (I have been reading a history of the Balkans over the last 200 years. In that sorry history, every time there is a massacre, sooner or later there is a massacre in revenge.) Under the brave and generous leadership of Nelson Mandela, something different was tried. People were invited to give evidence to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and if they were open and honest about their own crimes they could go free. Now I'm not saying that it was a great thing that people accepted that invitation, because there was a very big incentive to do so: if they didn't, they could be arrested and tried and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. The point is that because they admitted their crimes, they gave a kind of life back to their victims. The victims didn't have to forgive them, but because they had admitted it, it made it possible for them to forgive. And so life could begin again.

And if that is true between human beings, how much more is it true between us and God! For God is always ready to forgive. And as we say sorry to God, he comes to meet us and gives us the bread of life, the bread which is Christ, and in him we find life.

So let's look back over the lessons this encounter of king and prophet has taught us:

that we need to speak truth to power;

that we must speak in a way which people can catch on to;

that we must accept the judgment of God;

that repentance and forgiveness lead to reconciliation and to life.