

1 Sam 17:1, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49
Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32
2 Cor 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41

1 Sam. 17:45 "Then David said to the Philistine, 'You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.'"

The story of David and Goliath is one of the best known passages of the OT.

Even many people with no church background and little knowledge of the bible have some familiarity with it.

It is a story which all of us learned at school or in Junior Church, and which we remember throughout life (or at least that always used to be so; I am not sure how far that is still the case for the children growing up today).

Yet surprisingly enough, this is a passage of scripture on which I have never before preached.

The setting of this event is the conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines, which provided the motivation for the formation of the Israelite monarchy.

According to the biblical account, after the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites under the leadership of Joshua conquered the land of Canaan, and settled in the land, which was divided up and allocated to the Israelite tribes.

For many years, the Israelite tribes were led by a series of charismatic judges, who arose from time to time and delivered them in various conflicts which arose with some of the neighbouring peoples.

But eventually the Philistines came to pose a much more serious threat to the Israelites, and even to threaten their very existence.

The origin of the Philistines is not completely known, but seems to have been in the Aegean world, and there are biblical passages linking them with Crete.

It is thought that they were allied with other sea peoples, who aimed to settle in Egypt, but when the Egyptians proved to be too strong for them, they settled in the coastal area of the Negeb, next to the land allocated to the tribe of Judah.

Thus the Philistines and the Israelites were both outsiders, competing to settle in the land of Canaan, hence the conflict between them.

It became clear to the Israelites that they needed more organised leadership than the judges had given in the past, the kind of leadership that could only be provided by a king.

Their first king, Saul, had some modest successes against the Philistines, but was unable to achieve any decisive victory.

This is the background to the confrontation which took place in the Valley of Elah.

The story of David and Goliath is a long and very readable narrative, though it is evidently made up of material from more than one source, which does not always fit very well together.

There is also the difficulty that some elements of this material do not fit very well with the previous chapter (1 Sam 16), which relates that David had been anointed by Samuel and had been received into the king's court to act as a minstrel to Saul.

Yet here in chapter 17, Saul does not appear to know David.

The Israelite and Philistine armies stood on mountains on either side of the valley of Elah.

From the Philistine side, there came out a "champion", named Goliath from Gath.

This word translated "champion" means literally "a man of the space between", that is to say between two armies, thus a champion or challenger who was ready to engage in single combat for his army.

Goliath called upon the Israelites to provide a combatant to fight with him, and the army of whichever of them lost the fight would be subservient to the other.

The story of how David killed Goliath with a stone from his sling is so well known that I do not think that I need to go over the details.

It is a very well-liked passage of the bible, particularly because it epitomises victory against overwhelming odds.

In any conflict or dispute between an individual and another person or group of persons, and the odds are stacked against one side, perhaps all of us have a natural inclination to support the side that we perceive to be the under-dog, particularly if it represents a just cause.

In the modern world this might be an individual person standing up against a large organisation, perhaps a government department or a multi-national company, which has acted unreasonably.

When the small man wins against such overwhelming odds, probably all of us would want to applaud that victory.

The fight between David and Goliath was a very unequal one in several respects.

It was certainly unequal in terms of size and therefore sheer physical strength.

Goliath is said to have had a height of six cubits and a span, which is reckoned to be about 9 feet 6 inches.

Even if this is an exaggeration, doubtless Goliath towered far above the young lad David.

Moreover, Goliath was probably well-experienced in combat, whereas David had no such experience, and was accustomed only to keeping his father's sheep.

Goliath was well kitted-out in armour and weaponry, and his accoutrements recall those of medieval knights.

Yet when David attempted to walk wearing armour, he was unable to do so.

In any case, the Philistines and therefore Goliath may well have had superior weapons.

There is a somewhat obscure passage in 1 Sam 13:19-23 which seems to suggest that the Israelites were dependent on the Philistines for their expertise in metal working.

So the match between David and Goliath was on the face of it a very unequal one.

On the other hand, David did have some distinct advantages in his favour.

Most obviously, there was his skill at using a sling, which he had acquired as a shepherd defending his sheep against lions and bears, a skill which he was able to use to lethal effect against the Philistine.

But even more than this was his awareness that he was acting in the name of the God of Israel, whom his opponent had defied.

And his conviction that what he was doing was for the sake of this God would surely have given him confidence in the outcome of his action.

Our Gospel reading is about a different kind of victory in the face of overwhelming odds.

This time it is not about a little man versus a big man, but about man versus the forces of nature.

As Jesus was going across the Sea of Galilee in a boat with his disciples, a great storm of wind suddenly arose, so that the waves beat against the boat and it began to fill with water.

But Jesus was asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat, apparently oblivious to the danger that threatened them.

His disciples woke him with the words, "Teacher, do you care if we perish?"

On waking, Jesus rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, with the words, "Peace! Be still!"

At this the wind ceased, and there was a great calm, and Jesus questioned the disciples about their fear and lack of faith.

This event related by Mark, and likewise Matthew and Luke, was evidently regarded by the earliest Christians as saying something important about Jesus.

In order to appreciate its significance for them, we have to remember that in Jewish thought the original act of creation involved God being victorious in a contest with the forces of chaos and evil, which were identified with, or at least, located in the waters of the sea.

Therefore, the ability to control the sea and subdue tempests was regarded as a characteristic sign of divine power.

Thus the psalmist (in Ps 89:8-9) can say, "Who is as mighty as you, O LORD? Your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them."

Moreover, the image of great waters was often used as a metaphor for the evil forces active in the world, and particularly for the tribulations of the righteous, from which only the power of God could save them (Ps 18:16; 69:1-2, 14-15).

The verses of Psalm 107 which we read earlier express an assurance that even in the most terrible storm God has the power and determination to save those who turn to him for help.

It is also interesting to note that the ability to sleep peacefully and untroubled was considered to be a sign of perfect trust in the sustaining and protective power of God.

Thus the psalmist in Ps 4:8 can say, "I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety."

With this background in mind, we can see that the early church would have seen some important truths to be learned about Jesus from the account of his stilling of the storm.

Although sudden violent storms were liable to blow up on the lake, Jesus was able to lie down and sleep in peace, for he had complete faith in the divine power to make him "lie down in safety".

By contrast, the disciples showed themselves, as on other occasions, to be men of little faith.

Most importantly, Jesus was able to overcome even the forces of nature, in order to save his disciples.

He was able to rebuke the wind and the sea on their behalf, as though these represented personal demonic forces which threatened their lives.

Ultimately, what St Mark relates here – Jesus among his disciples in the boat – is a symbolic representation of the risen Jesus standing among his followers in the church.

The greatest of the forces of nature which all of us must come up against is death, and at the centre of our faith is one who overcame even death itself.

We believe in faith that his is a victory in which we shall all share.