



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

Open Heart and Open Hands

1 Samuel 31:1-6; 2 Samuel 1:17-20, 23-27; 2:4a; Matthew 14:6-14

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We've all experienced it: the phone call that wakes you in the small hours; the friend who speaks too hesitantly as she breaks the news; the casual comment which assumed you knew already – he/she has died.

Shock strikes your heart; spring freezes to winter; colours fade to grey as the shadow of death comes over you.

David had been waiting to know the outcome of the battle. He knew it was going to be fought – he had nearly been in it himself - on the wrong side. How would the battle go? He knew so many of the Israelite men: Saul, Jonathan, all the court and leaders, quite a few of the soldiers – he'd led them in battle. He knew some of the Philistines from living among them for a time. He knew Saul was losing the sanity – becoming more and more erratic.

How goes the battle? News came to David not as a phone call when no one should ring; not with the kind hesitancy of a friend; not even with the careless assumption long afterwards but on the gloating lips of a man who thought he would get a hefty tip.

In fact, Saul had been wounded and had fallen on his sword lest the enemy take him alive and torture him to death. But an Amalekite opportunist found the dead bodies and thought he could curry favour by saying he had killed Saul. Surely David would reward the one who killed his pursuer!

How little he knew – David does not rejoice in the death of Saul. David had twice refused to take Saul's life when he could have snuffed him out like a candle flame. David honours God's anointing of Saul as King and he would not harm him.

No, David does not rejoice that Saul is dead; he mourns for Saul and Jonathan. Open heart and open hands: He lets his grief out and he will not grasp God's promise for himself.

How do you grieve?

How do you meet grief? Basically we can either flee from it or face it. You either close your heart or open it.

Our culture strongly suppresses grief. We try to hide our grief as if it were something shameful. When children cry they are so often told to be brave or in some other way suppress their feelings.

In the Bible, we find that both Jesus and David faced grief. Take the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept."¹ When faced with the death of his friend Lazarus and the grief of his sisters, he weeps even though he knows that he is about to raise Lazarus to life again.

When John the Baptist was killed, Jesus goes aside to a quiet place. John was some sort of cousin (maybe a cousin once removed - their mothers were relatives). So this death is shocking in that here is a prophet murdered. It is shocking in the wantonness of the act. It is shocking in that John is God's servant and has been killed in doing his duty to his Lord. It is shocking because he is a family member. And Jesus goes aside to a private place. He needs time to deal with it. He does not brush it off bravely as if it didn't matter.

In the Old Testament account, after years of persecution and broken promises Saul and David's best friend are killed. Is David relieved that he does not have to flee anymore? Is he glad that Saul has got his come-uppance? No he grieves for Saul as well as for Jonathan.

As a song-writer he opened his heart or we might say he poured his heart out in song. He sings of Saul and Jonathan as the mighty and glorious ones of Israel. "In life they were loved and gracious, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions."

Jonathan was his warrior-covenant partner who had supported David as future king in preference to his own inheritance of the kingdom. David sings,

"I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women. How the mighty have fallen! The weapons of war have perished!"

David gives expression to his feelings. He weeps and laments for the lost of Israel's armies, for Jonathan, even for Saul. And he teaches his men to sing the song too. This was not the work of an idle hour, this was deliberate and repeated. The normal, formal, grieving period was a month and during that time the people focussed on giving expression to their loss.

Did you realise that 70% of the Psalms express sorrow? We find that the Psalms express emotion freely; it is what they do so well. There you can find pretty well any emotion you are feeling. And normally, they go on a journey starting in the difficult place and leading to trust in God. So use them to express your feelings to God. Tell him how you are feeling – it is not any surprise to him. Be honest with the Lord – just as David was.

Grief is the normal response to loss. It is, if you will, the other side of the coin of love. If you love, you will grieve at the parting.

In 1981, I had a holiday at Orama Christian Community on Great Barrier Island. I arrived two weeks after the founder, Neville Winger, had died. I stayed for a fortnight and as I got to know Mrs Winger I found her way of grieving very impressive. She obviously missed him deeply but she was willing and able to talk about him. Finally, I asked her why she was so different from most people. She told me how she had forced herself to face the pain. She had gone to the wardrobe and held his clothes. She caught his scent from them – she forced herself to experience the intensity of grief quickly. I don't know how it developed longer term but in that initial month she was quite remarkable.

What about the other approach to loss – fleeing from it. The trouble is grief doesn't just go away. If we bottle it, we store it and unlike your preserved fruit it goes sour.

When I was in London, I met a nun who ran a feeding programme for homeless men. She and her team provided lunch daily together with access to clothes, toiletries, foot care, a barber, etc. She told me that virtually all of them maintained a constant state of inebriation which was just enough to suppress their emotions. When I asked her what the typical reason was, she said if you ask them it is nearly always grief. Unable to face grief they medicated it away with alcohol. The next time I met a man begging in the town

¹ John 11:35

square, I got talking to him and eventually asked him why he drank. Rather to my surprise, he told me it was because his mother and sister had been murdered in Africa and he couldn't handle it.

Another homeless man, I met told me that when his father died he couldn't face the grief and started drinking. The next thing he knew he woke up in a bus shelter six months later.

I happened on an article last night about helping children develop resilience so they can cope with setbacks. It stated, "...willingness to share feelings is the forerunner to healing and paves a path of resilience."²

Twice, I have visited intellectually handicapped young adults who have lost a family member. In both cases, they complained of a pain in the chest. As we talked I realised it was grief. But they did not know what it was. When we talked about it, they were helped to understand that this was a normal, very strong sadness. Just being able to talk about it and understand a little of what it was made a remarkable difference for them both.

"Willingness to share feelings is the forerunner to healing and paves a path of resilience" – an open heart.

The article continued with strategies for rebuilding resilience which we could all use for ourselves or others:

- Pray together – home groups can help here.
- Develop a dialogue of hope that concludes with an affirmation like, 'I will thrive and survive.' We have noted the journey of the psalms, which so often move from despair hope.
- Connection with other people who are resilient: In our midst in addition to friendships and home groups, Christina Jensen offers a friendly visit and readiness to listen when any of us are dealing with grief.
- Identify a role model who shows resilience and recall times when we have shown any such qualities: We might think of David as a role model.
- Recall times when we have used strength, hope and courage to get through circumstances. These are the components of resilience. Try to identify these qualities in ourselves so we may more easily draw on them when we need them.

In David, we have seen a "...willingness to share feelings is the forerunner to healing and paving a path of resilience" – we have seen an open heart.

David did not grasp what was promised

I have said in David we see an open heart and open hands. He did not grasp God's promises before their time.

Today's reading ended with David being crowned. He had not sought this. He had not demanded it. He honoured Saul as king. He refused to harm him even when he was hunted down. With Saul gone, he did not proclaim himself as king. He asked the Lord where he should go. The answer was Hebron and there he went. Then the men of Judah came to him and crowned him as their king.

There is a principle here of submission and patience.

We are elsewhere that David was thirty when he was crowned. From anointing to crowning may have been something like fifteen years. Most of that time he was persecuted. Fifteen years is a long time to wait for the fulfillment of a promise. Even then, he was crowned king by the men of Judah – not the rest of Israel. It took another 7½ years of civil war before he was king of all Israel – that's 22½ years to the fullness of the promise.

A lesser man would have used the anointing to grasp the crown for himself. But David shows a different character, he is prepared to hold those promises with open hands.

² *Encounter Magazine*, Edition 10, September 2012, Laidlaw College, p2: Rombouts L., *Promoting the 'Bounce Forward' in Children*

So often when we grasp things, we find they are spoilt by our greed, but when we let God do it in his way, all things work together for good.

Finale

We have followed David through all these years from his being a youth to his crowning. There is more to the story in 2 Samuel, where we read of his rule of Israel with the glories and disasters that followed. However, to follow him through his reign will be the task of another year.

What have we learnt from him? I don't expect you to remember all these points, but maybe there is one which needs your attention. What do you need to apply in your life?

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| 1. David's anointing: | God looks on the heart not the outward appearance |
| 2. Goliath: | For every giant there is a promise of God. |
| 3. Covenant with Jonathan: | Models Jesus' covenant with us. |
| 4. Saul's failure to repent: | The importance of true repentance. |
| 5. David gets supplies from the tabernacle: | God supplies provisions and our spiritual weapons |
| 6. Death of priests: | Sin and suffering are real; God is faithful to his word. |
| 7. Saul in the cave: | Honour God's chosen. |
| 8. Abigail turns David from wrath: | Be teachable. |
| 9. He strengthened himself in the Lord: | Find strength through prayer and song. |
| 10. Equal shares for his tired followers: | Be generous to others. |
| 11. David grieved openly | Open heart. |
| 12. He did not grasp the crown | Open hands. |

Thank you, Lord, the example of David. Help us to learn from his lessons and become a people after your own heart.

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