

The theme of this series for the month of June is "Kingdom and Empire" and the idea behind it is that God promises that his Kingdom will come and there will be certain characteristics about God's Kingdom, but actually they will be very different to the Empires of our world. And so we're thinking about the way that power shows itself both in God's Kingdom and in the Empires and the structures of power that have existed down through the centuries, and still exist in our world today. So that's the sort of broad picture of what we're looking at in this series. We going to look at scripture together: II Samuel 21:1-14, and that's in the Old Testament.

[Reading II Samuel 21:1-14]

A lot of the Old Testament needs a good explanation, and that is also true of this passage. So we're going to need to just unpick what is being said in those 14 verses.

For a moment or two I would like us to think about how we understand this man King David. How do we view him? On the one hand I think we've air-brushed the reality of the sort of king that David was; we remember him as:

- **The Shepherd**, who being a shepherd back there was a dangerous occupation: you had lions and wolves and bears and other creatures – animals that would seek to come and kill the sheep and carry them off; being a shepherd in those days you had to be prepared to defend yourself and the flock. So we think of David as the brave Shepherd;
- we also think of him as a **Freedom Fighter**. Of course, one of the most famous stories about David was when the great Philistine champion Goliath, who was supposedly a really tall man and there's a friend of mine who once used to say: he was built like a brick wash house – he was sort of like, you know, a powerful man. And he was making fun of the Israelites saying "Who will fight me?" And none of the none of the mighty warriors of Israel wanted to fight him, and David, the teenage boy, stepped forward and said "I'll fight him!" And Saul insisted that David should wear his armour but the armour was far too big and David was only a teenager and he couldn't stand up in it properly, so he said "Forget the armour, I will defend God's people using my sling!" And he did so of course with the stone that hit Goliath in the forehead. So we remember David as that mighty Freedom Fighter fighting to free his people from the Philistines who wanted to dominate them and take over the land;
- we remember David, perhaps as the **Harpist** who soothed Saul – helped Saul who suffered with these terrible pains. These days we probably think it was something like migraines or bipolar that caused him to have terrible fits of anger;
- The interesting thing is what we tend to airbrush is whether David was a **Mass Murderer**. When we think of what he did, whether he was guilty of war crimes.

Now that's one side that perhaps we remember all those things but we forget all the killing that David did, but on the other hand we can't simply transpose what happened 3 or even 4 millennia ago – we can't use 21st century morality to understand what happened 3 millennia ago. We can't simply take our 21st century morality and read back into things that happened well over 2000 years ago.

So how should we view and understand this account of David's life and how should we understand and make sense of this man's life? For a start, this is early in David's kingship, he's only just come to power in the last few years, and he came to power in desperate times. There you can see a picture or representation of the Israelite army gathering together ready to fight a war. And this was a time when political Alliances and political treaties were being made and were being broken. This was a time of shifting power within the Middle East. It was a time when this small nation of Israel was seeking to establish itself amongst the other nations around it. It was seeking to secure itself so that it didn't get taken over by as, we've said, the Babylonians, or the Philistines or other groups (the Assyrians) – the nation was trying to protect itself and its identity.

David only recently come to the throne, as I've said, and he needed to assert his leadership. It was also, the reading told us, a time of famine. And of course famine is the one of the things, the fear of famine really hasn't changed down through the years – even today when particularly developing countries find there is a drought, but we know that Australia only recently had a drought that lasted for 3 years and although there was no starvation food became increasingly difficult to sustain, even in a developed nation like Australia. So there was a famine in Israel and the nation was caught up in this, and it lasted, as I say, 3 years. This was therefore once again a test of David's kingship, but it was also a test of the people patience and their loyalty because people did tend to be a bit superstitious and they would have wondered “this new king has come to the throne and now we've had this 3-year drought; is this God saying actually this is not the right man to be king? Should we deposing and put somebody else in power who has God's favour?”

So these were desperate times. And of course, as they say, desperate times call for desperate measures. Now actually today's passage, the passage that we read that had loads of the names of different tribes and different people in there (my experience with some of these Old Testament names is: just say it confidently and stick with the way you've decided to say it – sound confident people will believe you), is part of the official court records of the Israelite court, that is of David's court and the courtiers around him. And it was providing an account of what King David did and said.

But actually quite a few commentators, quite a few Bible commentators, quite a few to Bible scholars read this and they think that the account (that we had read earlier on) may actually be dripping with irony. Let me explain what I mean by that. In fact although the writer says he blames the famine on King Saul (the previous King) and his family, the writer seems to want us to draw our own conclusions from David's actions, because in fact there is absolutely no record at all of King Saul massacring a group of Gibeonites. There are lots of massacres that he did do but we can find no historical evidence for him having killed this this tribe, large numbers of this tribe.

Some Biblical scholars, as I say, think that this was actually King David removing the offspring of Rizpah. Now Rizpah was one of King Saul's concubines – now a concubine was a mistress, but she was an official mistress, so the king back in those days would have a wife, but he also could have official mistresses, and he may have children with those mistresses but they wouldn't have the authority of being sons, particularly of his wife, but in desperate times the people might turn even to a son of a concubine, if they were desperate enough for a new king. So Rizpah had been the concubine, the official mistress, of King Saul and Merab was one of Saul's daughters. And lots of scholars think that this might have been King David who was putting these killed people up on the wall of the of the city and their bodies left there exposed (and we're going to talk a little bit about exposure means in a moment); it's thought that King David may actually have been getting rid of

some potential rivals to the throne. If he kills these people, the offspring of Rizpah and Merab, he could be dealing with people who could have been rivals in the future, to challenge David's reign once they grew up.

I don't know about you, but I like to watch wildlife programmes, and you may have seen on the Serengeti, or other places, the lion pride, and it seems to be the male lions have an easy time of it! They are sort of in charge of the tribe, but it's the female lions, the lionesses, that do most of the hunting, and there'll be an older lioness who often has the wisdom to know how to catch an antelope, wildebeest or a whatever they're after, and then the younger lionesses will also be part of this pack that finds food. And they'll bring an animal down and then the male lion will come and take the best of that kill; and then the lionesses have some, and then it goes down to the cubs. But the only time when a male lion really has to step-up is when he is challenged by another male lion, a usurper wanting to take over the pride, and then he's got to step up and show that he is stronger than the usurper that's coming in. And if the usurper, the one that is challenging the existing head of the pride, wins the first thing that new male lion will do in the new pride is to kill the cubs of the previous male leader of the pride. And perhaps in a sense this was what King David was doing here: dealing with the young pretenders to his throne who in years to come could challenge him. So desperate times call for desperate measures, and was this David seeking to establish and consolidate his power by having these potential threats removed?

But the reality is two wrongs don't make a right. It may have been Saul that did kill all these Gibeonites, but even if he did so, the killing of these offspring of Rizpah and Merab, we don't know whether the offspring were adults or whether they were children. They could have been teenagers, teenage children of Rizpah and Merab who were killed. But whether you accept the interpretation that it was actually David dealing with his rivals, or whether it actually was Saul who kill the Gibeonites, it was the same outcome for Rizpah and Merab: their children were killed, but not just killed, they were then left exposed (exposure meant to leave the bodies out hanging in the open, and the idea was that the bodies would be picked clean by the birds or by scavenging animals).

But what could these women do? What could they do in the face of this injustice – their children, their offspring, were innocent of having been involved in these political machinations as it were; what could they do? They were only concubines, they weren't even wives, they were just the mistresses of now a dead King. They had no power influence.

Now Merab presumably nursed her own grief in a private way – we don't know what Merab did, perhaps she just nursed that pain, that grief for her children that she had lost. But Rizpah took action. Rizpah laid out of sackcloth, and even today we talk about sackcloth and ashes (don't we) when somebody is mourning something terrible that has happened. She took sackcloth and she camped by the bodies of her children, and, a bit like the picture represents, she had something, probably a stick, so if the crows or the other types of animals were trying to the flesh of her children, she would beat them off and stop them.

Now the likelihood is her reckless action of sleeping out by the bodies of her children got to be known across the nation – this reckless act of love and grief for her murdered children was being talked about across the whole nation. And actually that would be the reason why in the end King David himself would have heard of what Rizpah was doing.

And so in this passage we have the actions of this mother pricking the conscience of the king. King David heard about this grizzly, awful vigil that Rizpah was taking to protect the bodies of her

children. And his humanity was pricked, his humanity was stimulated so that he realised because of her love her desperate grief. His humanity came to the fore.

King David is often regarded as the greatest of Israel's kings, but I would suggest to you that even at this stage in his life he had been so dehumanized by years of war and threats of being killed – remember that Saul got in the end that David had to go and live in caves with his men, and had to fight to survive as Saul's army searched for him to try and kill him. So I would suggest to you that David had been so dehumanized by this life of either kill or be killed that he was prepared to use the lives of these young people, the children of Rizpah and Merab, in such a heartless, brutal and self-serving way. And yet King David still did amazing things.

In one of my previous churches, when I was in the Salvation Army, we had a group of people who worshipped with us from Zimbabwe and I remember chatting to one of them and they were telling me that when their parents had said when Robert Mugabe first came to power as the President of Zimbabwe he had been a Freedom Fighter, and they said he was a good president. He did all sorts of things to make Zimbabwe a country where the black majority was valued and could really take ownership of the nation. Of course things went wrong later on, and Robert Mugabe moved from being a good president to really being a dictator in the nation – power can corrupt, as we know. And perhaps David here has been corrupted by what he has had to do to gain power, that actually it affected him and dehumanised him in some ways.

In South Africa archbishop Desmond Tutu who was an anti-apartheid campaigner and won a Nobel Peace Prize, said this: “True revolution is when the oppressed are freed from being oppressed and the oppressors are freed from being oppressors.” Because the thing with depression, the thing with having power over others and using it in that brutal way is that it's not just the people that you are holding down who are imprisoned – you are, as the oppressor, imprisoned by the fact that you have to continue doing things that dehumanize you to retain your power. That's what Desmond Tutu's saying there, that actually with oppression everyone is oppressed in the sense of everyone is finding that they are not free to be the people they should be, the people that God wants them to be, because oppression causes them to have to use their power.

Just some points to reflect on from this passage.

- Firstly Empires always create winners and losers. Now when I talk about Empires I'm really talking about any state where there is both the powerful and the powerless, and to be honest with you every state has that, every country has that: we have those that have power and Influence and privilege, and those that don't. I mean empires in that sense. But every Empire always creates winners and losers; or more accurately they create elites, they create groups that hold a lot of power and privilege, but they also often tend to creator a despise underclass who often are not even regarded as human. During the Second World War the Nazis regarded certain people, the Jews but also other people gypsies and other Eastern Europe, as what they called “untermensch”, that is “subhuman”. And when you've reduced somebody to less than a human being you can then justify doing terrible things to them. Well, there's a danger in any state, any country, that we can view certain people as less human, less worthy, than the rest of us, and that can pave the way to dreadful oppression unless we challenge it. Empires always create winners and losers.
- Sometimes lose have to take desperate measures just to be heard. When you have no power what are you going to do to make people listen to the fact sure that you have got

something to say, that you're being treated in a terrible way. What are you going to do? When you have no power or influence the only option you have sometimes is to create a scandal, which is what Rizpah did: she scandalised the nation by being out there standing next to the bodies, and probably in the end the skeletons of her own children to make the king listen. When you've got no power you have to sometimes take desperate measures to get your appalling circumstances noticed.

- Thirdly, I would ask you, what can we do to actively support some of the most vulnerable people in this Empire, and like I say I'm not making a party political point there at all. I'm using that word Empire to mean where power rests in a particular nation, in a particular state. There will always be those who find themselves pushed to the margins. What can we do to actively support and stand with those who find themselves pushed to the margins? It could be unaccompanied children in holding camps in our country, but also in Europe, or other asylum seekers – people seeking a safer life for themselves and their families. Some of the most vulnerable in our country, and in our part of the world: homeless people on our streets. Amazingly during the last 15 months one of the great things has been that many cities have taken the opportunity to get all of the rough sleepers off the streets into temporary accommodation. The challenge now is that as we come out of restrictions, as we hopefully move out of the great dangers of Covid that we have had, do we then simply push those people back out onto the streets to die prematurely and have an awful life?

Sometimes we talk about the deserving poor and the undeserving poor, and once again the way that sometimes we make judgement on people's choices, so often people who are suffering with addictions or a very very difficult upbringing and childhood, and we so often want to sit in judgement on people's choices. So I just wanted to bring to you that idea: what can we do to stand with those who find themselves marginalized and devalued in our situation?

Let's pray for a moment.

Lord Jesus we come to you this morning recognising that there are power issues in our country but also even in the relationships that we have with those around us, in our work situation, even amongst our friends and our families. We recognise that power dynamics exist in all these situations. But Lord we bring to you those who so often find they have no voice, or so little voice, to be heard, so little power and influence. Your word tells us so often that you hear the cries of the poor and the oppressed. And we pray Lord God in our world as we in the West start to come out of Covid-19 restrictions but many other parts of the world are still caught up in the worst of this pandemic, Lord we pray for those who are living in incredibly difficult circumstances, in refugee camps around our world, in circumstances where they wonder where the next meal is coming from, where they fear the bombs may land on their home, where they wonder what future their children are going to have. Lord God help us to resist compassion fatigue but rather to do what we can to speak out, to be generous with what we have, and to see our world reflect more your Justice and your goodness in your name we pray these things Lord Jesus, Amen.