

True courage (1 Samuel 17)

I often say things like “If you’ve coming to church for a while then you’ll know this story,” or “If you grew up going to Sunday school then you’ll know this story”, or something like that. But this morning, I can say, without qualification, that you know the story. Everyone does.

Or at least everyone knows 90% of the story, because not every telling of the story includes that gruesome bit at the end where David hacks off Goliath’s head .

But we know the story, weak David of Israel stands up to Goliath, the fearsome giant of the Philistines, and because he trusts in God, he puts a stone in his sling and kills Goliath.

And a common take on the story is, if we just trust in God like David did, we can kill all the evil giants in our lives too.

There is something in that, but I don’t think that’s the whole lesson or the main lesson for us. I think, if we look at the story – and it is a long story (it goes for a whole chapter; we’ve only heard excerpts from it today) – there is a lot to learn from it.

The story begins with the Philistines gathering their armies for battle in Israelite territory at Socoh, and the Israelites gathering their armies on the other side of the valley. They were both mighty armies – and they were both battle-tested and effective armies.

If they went into battle, there would have been bloodshed. Hundreds, thousands on both sides would have died, and even the side which won, would have suffered greatly in the victory.

And then from verse 4 we read “A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span.”

We don’t get a lot of detailed physical descriptions of people in the bible, so we should just contemplate Goliath for a moment – six cubits and a span tall - three metres. His mail coat, five thousand shekels – about 60 kilos. The iron point of his spear was about seven kilos.

He’s this giant of bronze and iron. He seems super human. He was bigger than anyone else. He was stronger than anyone else – he had to be, considering the weight of armour and weapons he was carrying.

The writer, Ben Elton, has suggested that David ultimately won the battle because he had superior weapons technology. But that’s not the case. Goliath had technology on his side. Bronze mail. Bronze javelin. Iron tipped spear. That was the best that was on offer. David on the other hand had a truly ancient weapon. A sling: stone, and a strip of leather – or probably wool.

Goliath is intimidating, he seems unbeatable. And he taunts the Israelites: He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, “Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill

me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us.” (17:8-9)

It’s an interesting offer, isn’t it? Rather than our two armies slogging it out, and all the damage that’ll do, let’s just settle it one on one. Save all the bloodshed.

Is it a reasonable offer? It might be, if you had someone who stood a chance against Goliath.

You can imagine King Saul and the assembled Israelite army hearing the offer, hearing the challenge. We read in verse 11 that they were dismayed and terrified.

Was Goliath afraid, do you think? Do you think he had any notion that he could possibly lose a one-on-one fight?

I don’t think he conceived he could lose. Every indication is that he was utterly confident. Confident in his size and strength, confident in his abilities as a warrior, and confident in his armour and weapons. He was confident. He was fearless. He had courage.

That’s the sort of courage that people want. To be self-confident. To stop worrying about all those things that hold us back. To bravely step out. To trust in our own abilities. To get our fear under control and so on.

There’s any number of motivational posters that we could get with those sorts of sayings.

But ultimately, if our courage comes from ignoring our fears, we can lose touch with reality. Because the reality is that the world is a dangerous place – we should be afraid of some things. Goliath wasn’t afraid of David: Verse 42 “[Goliath] looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy, ...[and he] said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?”

So, Goliath wasn’t afraid... but what about David? Was David afraid, do you think?

Well, David was confident – if we look back to verses 36 and 37 - “Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.”

David was confident... but not confident in his strength or ability or technology – but confident in God protecting him.

And often that’s what people take out of this story. That if we have confidence in God protecting us. If our faith is as strong as David’s, then we will be victorious in whatever it is that we’re trying to do.

But the danger is that if we have such confidence. If our faith is so strong we believe we are impervious to failure, then we start regarding our faith in the same way Goliath regarded his armour. Our strong faith, we think, will save us.

But Paul tells the Romans, it's not the strength of our faith that matters, but it's rather who we have our faith in.

So, if we shouldn't be like Goliath, and if we try to be like David, we might end up being like Goliath anyway... who are we like?

Well, most of the time, I think we're like the Israelites: The dismayed and terrified Israelites. People who were facing a great battle... and now had an opportunity to avoid that, if they could only find a champion to take on Goliath. But if that champion failed, they would be enslaved, and the nation – God's chosen people – would be no more.

We might not be facing an ultimate battle that may well lead to our demise. But if you look at us as the people of God, the church, in the 21st century, then the label dismayed is probably pretty near the mark. We're dismayed: we wanted growth, but we haven't got it. The next generations have mostly left the church. Yes, we're dismayed.

And as we look to the future, we're afraid, too. We look at church attendance census to census and plot a line forwards. What's going to happen to the church?

But what does God give to people who are dismayed and terrified? What did God give the Israelites when faced with Goliath?

Was it courage? Was it strength? Was it self esteem and confidence?

It was none of those things! Instead of those things, God gave them a champion: Someone to stand in their place. Someone to take on those things that they couldn't.

David wasn't an example for the Israelites to follow, but he was a champion, a deliverer, a saviour for them.

To understand that, we need to go back to the circumstances of the fight: Goliath challenged the nation of Israel "Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." (17:8-9)

David, when he took his staff and his sling and his five stones, didn't just go out kill Goliath, he went out to save the people. To save the dismayed and terrified army standing behind him – and all their families at home.

In the fight against Goliath the Philistine, he wasn't simply fighting for the nation, he was fighting as the nation. When David won the fight, the whole nation won.

If we flip forward in the bible to Hebrews chapter 11 David is mentioned amongst the champions of the people of God: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the

prophets. The writer to the Hebrews tells us of the great things these champions did: Conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness and so on and on.

And then, as chapter 12 begins, all those things are put into context: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

The word which is translated as ‘pioneer’ is the Greek ‘archegos’ which also be translated as ‘author’ or ‘architect’ or even ‘champion’.

We should remember David as a champion of ancient Israel, but we should look to Jesus as our champion.

David risked his life to save the nation, but Jesus gave his life to save us.

If David won a victory over the Philistines, then his nation won a victory over the Philistines.

And as Jesus won a victory over death, so we have won a victory over death.

Jesus victory wasn’t over fear; Jesus wasn’t fearless in what he did. As we read the gospel accounts of Jesus last days, we read of a man who was afraid. This is from Matthew “Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death... he threw himself on the ground and prayed “My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me”.

A few years ago, it was trendy amongst young Christians to wear a WWJD? Bracelet. What would Jesus do? The idea being that whenever you needed to decide something you’d think, “what would Jesus do?”. And in some ways it’s a good thing, because we should be being more Christlike... but in other ways it’s a terrible thing: Firstly, because we’re doomed to failure at it, and secondly, and more importantly, Jesus is far more than simply an example for Christians to follow.

Look at today’s gospel reading - Mark 4:35-41. Jesus and the disciples are on a boat and there’s a storm – the disciples wake Jesus, and say to him “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” and we read that Jesus “He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.”

If we were in a storm, and relied on our WWJD? bracelets, would we really be standing up and saying “Quiet! Be still” to the wind and the rain.

The disciples didn’t need an example, they needed someone to save them. And they turned to Jesus.

The nation of Israel didn’t need an example, they needed someone to fight for them, to fight in their place. Someone to save them.

And it's the same with us, we don't simply need an example, someone to guide what we do, we need someone to save us. We need a champion.

And Jesus is that champion.

In what he did, Jesus didn't ignore fear, but he carried on despite fear. Jesus' courage wasn't like Goliath's courage, courage that swept away fears or ignored fears. Goliath's courage was defiant courage – it ignored the facts and ignored fear.

Jesus' courage was true courage. Courage in the face of fear.

And we can have true courage, too. We can have courage in spite of our fears. Not because we can be like Jesus, but because we can trust in what Jesus has done. That passage from Hebrews says, of Jesus "[for] the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

The sake of joy. Joy. Shalom. Peace not just on earth, but between God and people.

The challenge for us, is to have such courage in the face of whatever we might face. To understand what dangers there are. To have courage in spite of whatever our fears might be.

Don't be like Goliath, and be so self-confident that you ignore your fears,

Don't even try to be like David.

Don't ask 'what would Jesus do?' but instead remember what Jesus has done.

Just trust in Jesus. Today, and always.

Amen.