

David and Goliath

I'm guessing that most of us are familiar with the story of David and Goliath. If you're a bit shaky, let me remind you. It's from 1 Samuel in the OT, and the events described go back to around 1000BC. Israel had just become a kingdom under their first king, Saul. To the south and west of Israel lay the kingdom of Philistia, and throughout much of this period, its inhabitants, the Philistines, were the deadly enemy of Israel. And so appears Goliath, Philistine superman, to face the Israelite army. According to first Samuel, he's 3m tall, his armour weighs 80 kg and the head of his spear 7kg. He taunts the Israelite armies: 'give me a man to fight with me, and if I defeat him, then you will become our subjects and serve us; but if he kills me then we become your subjects' And basically, everyone on the Israel side runs away. Scared literally to death. No volunteers. And then David appears. He's just a boy, a shepherd. But as we heard read, he approaches king Saul and tells his story: *'The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.'* So Saul said to David, *'Go, and may the Lord be with you!'* (1 Sam 17:37). He tries on Saul's armour, but it's too heavy and big for him. He takes his sling and chooses 5 smooth stones from a stream – probably each the size of a cricket ball! – and launches one at Goliath. It lands smack on his forehead and the giant falls flat on his face, literally stone dead! Game over.

In modern culture you can sometimes hear 'David and Goliath' mentioned as a trope, a metaphor for the battle between the little guy, the underdog, taking on and defeating the big guy. Think Frodo facing Sauron, Harry Potter facing Voldemort, or 'Tank man' facing down a column of Chinese tanks after the Tiananmen square massacre in 1989. In the OT narrative, where we are now in the bible, it's the moment when the kingship of Israel effectively passes from Saul to David: but it will be years before David actually becomes king.

Before I go any further, I need to acknowledge that, fantastic story though it is, it also feels quite uncomfortable. The word 'Philistine' is probably related to the word 'Palestine'. And the kingdom of Philistia at around the time of this story is where Gaza is now: Gaza is an ancient city. It is scriptures like this, and others, which underpinned Israel's perceived right to exist as an independent kingdom during the OT period, and to fight to maintain that. That same sense still energises and motivates some of the hard-liners among the government and people of the modern state of Israel. It's the belief that the land that they occupy is God-given and therefore they are justified to use force to keep it. So this story, and many like it in the OT, have a surprisingly contemporary resonance. But not in a good way.

We have to interpret this story through the prism of Jesus. Jesus who was also known as *'Son of David'* (Matthew 1:1-17, 15:22 etc). Jesus lived under occupation by the pagan Romans, not just under a threat of occupation. A brutal occupation that did not hesitate to use force to suppress resistance. There was a hope amongst many that Jesus would be the leader who would rise up against them and throw off their occupation, drawing inspiration perhaps from precisely the story of David and Goliath. But this Son of David was not like his ancestor, King David. He did not bear a sling or a sword. He told his one of his friends to put down his sword when they came to arrest him (Luke 22:49-51). Here are his words from the Sermon on the Mount: *'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile...You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.'* (Matthew 5:38-45). Jesus eventually faced his own Goliath in the form of the religious hierarchy of his own community, who cynically but effectively used the hated Roman occupiers to do their dirty work. Jesus found the strength and courage through faith in his Father, through the interior knowledge that this was for him the right path, to face unjust condemnation and vicious death. As he was being crucified, he even found the grace to forgive his enemies (Luke 23:34). What came out of that 'defeat' was resurrection, the defeat of death, and new life. He yielded to one Goliath and defeated another. I'd like to add that even Jesus also experienced fear and anguish as he faced crucifixion. Who wouldn't? He was human!: *'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me!...In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground'*

(Matthew 22:42,44). Jesus faced not only crucifixion, but his *fear* of crucifixion. It was his *fear* that he wrestled with in prayer – and found the courage he needed.

So how do we make sense of the story of David and Goliath? Let's focus on David's undeniable qualities of courage and faith. *'David said to the Philistine, 'You come to me with sword and spear and 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. ⁴⁶ This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand'* (vv.45,46) Let's stick there and ask this question: What Goliath are you facing? Something, or someone in your life so big and fearful that you feel paralysed by it, like King Saul did? What might that be? And is there another level, another Goliath: not only the thing itself, whatever it is, but the *fear* of the thing, the fear that paralyses us? The thing, the Goliath, might not go away, might not be defeated. It is our fear, our paralysis in the face of Goliath that we must bring to Christ and ask to find courage, trust, hope and love.

As a human race, we face many Goliaths. We are all conscious of the wars raging in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine, and the possibility of them to spread wider. We are conscious too of the huge threat to life on this planet as it relentlessly warms. *'We are perhaps at the end of the world as we know it'* is a phrase that sits uncomfortably with me, that's maybe my own Goliath, maybe it's yours too. Somehow, we each, and as a church community, must find courage, hope and love in our personal lives, in our prayer, in our worship, in our relationships, that sustains us and strengthens us so that we may not be defeated.

Today's reading from 1 Samuel, the story of David and Goliath is wonderfully twinned with the dramatic story from Mark 4, the stilling of the storm. It's a lovely parallel to David and Goliath, and it's free of the ambivalence I've been wrestling with in the OT story. Here is Jesus asleep in a boat, crossing the Sea of Galilee with his disciples. A storm blows up and the boat is being swamped. Jesus is having a nap, his head on a cushion, blithely unaware of the storm. He is at peace! The frightened and anxious disciples wake Jesus up: *'Don't you care we are perishing??'* (v.38) Jesus wakes, rebukes the wind, says to the sea *'Peace! Be still!'* – and all is calm. Then he asks the disciples, *'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'* (v.40). After all, Jesus was *actually in the boat with them*. And so he is with us.

What are we left with? Firstly, let's be careful as we interpret the story of David and Goliath, and in fact many stories from the OT. Let's always think about them through the prism of Jesus, while at the same time affirming them as sacred scripture through which God can speak and inspire. Let's ask ourselves, personally or as a body of faith, what Goliaths we face? What storm? What makes us tremble? Let's arm ourselves not with swords or slings, but, as David did, and the disciples in the boat with Jesus didn't, with courage, faith, hope, and love.

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