

SERMON: DAVID, THE BOY

6.6.2021

I am an old man now, nearly 70 and probably nearing the end of my life, but like many old people can look back and remember the things that happened in my youth ... sometimes better than what happened yesterday.

We were a happy family, living in Bethlehem, my 7 brothers and I. Being the youngest, it was my job to look after the family's flock of sheep. I didn't mind that, though, because it gave me lots of time to enjoy the wonders of nature and to compose and sing the praise songs the Lord gave me. I also enjoyed honing my skills with my catapult, which sometimes proved useful when a predator came too close to the sheep.

We were a good-looking family of boys, but obviously I can't claim any credit for that. It's the way Yahweh made us. However, he had told Samuel, the prophet, even before I was anointed, that I would be a man after God's own heart. He must have seen things in me that I couldn't see in myself because I know I let him down badly at times in my life. I think probably, though, those hours spent alone with him and the sheep had had an influence on me. It's so easy to spend a lot of time on caring for our outward appearance and far less on perfecting our inner character. Those hours spent on my own helped me to get to know God in a special way.

Anyway, to get back to the story ... I was out one day with the sheep when father sent someone to fetch me. The prophet Samuel had arrived in our home to offer a special sacrifice to Yahweh. God had told him that Saul was going to be replaced as leader of the nation and he, Samuel, was to find and anoint the new king. God would show him who it was and sent him to Bethlehem. That was a risky thing to do, of course, because Saul was still alive and would not have taken kindly to it if he learned that his prophet had promised the throne to someone else. Anyway, Samuel had looked at all my brothers but God hadn't approved any of them, so they sent for me.

To the surprise of all of us, God indicated to Samuel that I was the chosen one, but we kept it secret after the ceremony. Yahweh could just have ended the experiment of having a king, but he chose someone from the south of the country (Saul had come from the north). In the eyes of most people, I would have been the least likely candidate, but for some reason I was God's choice and he demonstrated that by sending his Spirit on me. That, like my skill with my sling, was preparation for the future, though I didn't know it at the time. I guess many of us can look back and see how God has used past events to prepare us for future service.

At this time Saul was suffering from psychological problems and his courtiers suggested that music might relieve the symptoms. One of them knew of my skill with the harp and so, to cut a long story short, I was called to the palace and engaged as an armour-bearer, though with special responsibility to play to the king when a black mood came upon him. He looked on me favourably and I think I became rather a favourite.

Some time later the country was threatened by enemies who troubled us periodically, the Philistines. They gathered an army at a place called Socoh, about 15 miles west of Bethlehem. They were on one hillside and our army on another, opposite. That meant that whichever army advanced would have to go down into the valley and so be at a disadvantage. There was a stand-off for 40 days. It was not unusual, especially in such circumstances, for a battle to be decided between individuals chosen to represent their army. This avoided unnecessary bloodshed and a large number of deaths on both sides.

The Philistine champion was a man called Goliath. He was physically imposing – more than 9 feet tall – and wore full metal armour. The Philistines had a highly advanced culture, both artistically and technologically, so they knew how to use iron, which we didn't at the time. Goliath's armour weighed about 57 kilos and even his spear-point was about 7 kg, so you can imagine how strong he must have been to carry all that.

While our soldiers were terrified of the man's appearance, they were also horrified at the sort of things he was saying about our God. Three of my brothers were in the army. Because Saul had to be with his army, I was free to return home temporarily and went back to looking after the sheep. However, one day my father, Jesse, asked me to take food to my soldier brothers and I was scandalized by the situation. How dare this infidel be rude about our God? Somebody needed to teach him a lesson! This godless man needed to understand the power of Yahweh. Far from being grateful to me, my brothers and others accused me of just being there to watch the battle. However, I didn't let their criticism daunt me because I knew I was doing what God wanted and they were doing nothing!

Saul heard I was there and sent for me. Nobody else was offering to take on Goliath, so I told the king I was ready to do it. I explained that I'd killed both a lion and a bear while looking after the sheep, so was not afraid of Goliath. He made me try on his armour, but he was also a tall man ... though not as tall as Goliath. Being allowed to wear it would have been a privilege, but I wasn't used to being encumbered in that way, so said I'd just use my sling and stones. I would put my trust in Yahweh and use the gifts and skill he'd given me.

When our army looked at Goliath, they saw an opponent who would be difficult to defeat. When I looked at him with the eyes of faith, I saw a target too big to miss. Goliath did not realise that he was not merely fighting a young shepherd boy but the power of God himself. I tried to look at the problem from God's point of view and that helped to put a giant problem in perspective.

Well, with God's help, I managed to land a stone in just the right place on Goliath's temple so that he fell down dead. I used his own sword to cut off his head and the other Philistines just turned round and ran off home. They didn't get off scot-free, though, because our army pursued them and a lot of them were killed.

Looking back on those days, I think there are several lessons I learned. Maybe they will be useful to you too.

- You never know how God will use the experiences you have. They may seem irksome or insignificant at the time, but sooner or later you will realise how

valuable they were. Hours spent on my own with the sheep had brought me closer to God. Defending them had taught me how to kill when it was necessary. Even having to be a servant in Saul's court turned out to be a good thing.

- Sometimes it's good to accept a minor role in life, at least for a time. Patience may be rewarded if God advances you later. Samuel had anointed me as future king long before it actually happened. I went and served in Saul's court, keeping my mouth shut about the fact that I knew I would replace him, but learned so much there about how to rule ... or how not to rule ... and so was much readier when my time came. I still made mistakes, but would have made many more without that time.
- I had to endure criticism, even from my brothers, those closest to me, but because I knew I was doing what God wanted and defending his cause, I carried on anyway. None of us finds criticism easy to bear, especially when we believe we are in the right, but sometimes we have to ignore it and press on regardless.
- Above all, I learned that God blesses our efforts when we try to honour him. I regret the times when, later in life, I sinned knowingly and deliberately, but he always accepted me back when I asked for forgiveness and the blessing I had known as a young man returned. God is nobody's debtor and I have been so blessed in my life. That's why I was able to write later: **Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.** Yes, those of us who know him are truly blessed.