16th November 2014

1 Samuel 18 and 19

There was a man who was stood outside a women’s fashion shop when he approached an attractive young woman. He said to her ‘would you mind if you talked to me for five minutes?’ The attractive young woman was bemused and suspicious and so asked him ‘why?’ The man replied ‘my wife has been in that fashion shop for half an hour: but if she sees me talking to you she will be out in a minute’.

We continue our look at the life of David. Last week we considered the famous story of his battle with Goliath. We considered the qualities of leadership that made him great – namely his faith and courage. This week we consider another aspect of leadership – that of jealousy and rivalry.

There is always one kid in the school who seems to have it all. Good looks, good grades, sporty and musical. Didn’t you just hate them? Maybe you were that person, in which case you may have been the object of jealousy. How did you cope with it? Our competitive, consumerist society thrives on jealousy and envy: that’s a nice car they have – how can they afford it? Why are they going on such good holidays and I have to put up with a weekend in a tent in Bognor. She got the job and the pay rise but I’m more qualified. It’s not fair. That church down the road, they attract all the families and they are three times the size of our church. Jealousy and rivalry! I’m sure we have all been there.

David has just defeated Goliath and the Philistine armies have been routed. In chapter 18 of 1 Samuel there is a victory procession. The women of Israel come out on to the streets to hail their heroes singing and dancing. The women sang ‘Saul struck down thousands, BUT David tens of thousands’.

In victory there should be no need for destructive comparison. There should be enough joy for all to share fully. But the author of 1 Samuel says this made Saul furious. The words rankled! ‘*They have ascribed to David tens of thousands and to me only thousands. What more can they do but make him king?’ From that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David.*

Jealousy is often the root cause of hatred and violence and even murder. Indeed in the next verses Saul is troubled by an evil spirit and has David play his lyre for him to bring soothing music to his troubled soul. Yet in his frenzy he throws a spear at David, narrowly missing him.

The rest of this chapter Saul does some political manoeuvrings to ty and trap David with women. He tries to get David to marry his daughter Merab in the hope that David will have to be his servant and fight more dangerous battles and maybe get himself killed. David sidesteps that challenge by saying he hasn’t got the class background to marry into royalty. He humbly denies his qualification for marriage. Maybe David saw through the plan – or perhaps he was innocent of it and just thought he wasn’t good enough.

Next up Saul offers him his second daughter, Michal. Michal actually loves David. Saul uses his own daughter to try and tempt David to his death. Saul has let jealousy get such a grip on him that he is willing to implicate his own daughter in the death of a person she actually cares for and loves. This is where the poison of jealousy can take you.

Saul drives a higher bargain for Michal and says to David you can have her if you bring me 100 Philistine foreskins. As no man would give you his foreskin voluntarily – this of course meant that the challenge was to kill100 Philistines. David is up for this challenge. He comes across as eager, innocent and beyond fear. The challenge ‘pleased him’.

He acts promptly and ahead of the deadline and even brings in 200 foreskins, twice the required number. Do you think this will endear him to Saul? This really is becoming a farce. Saul is honour bound to give David his daughter which he does. But surrounding this marriage is a great darkness of fear and destructiveness.

Saul continues to plot to kill David but is now more than ever isolated. His daughter Michal loves David. His son Jonathon loves David. Saul in his jealousy has pushed everyone away from him and lost his sanity. God has chosen David and blessed him and Saul can’t handle that. We are invited to watch while history works its relentless way toward God’s intention.

Is history a blind force or an act of sheer power? The Bible suggests that it is not the case. God has a purpose at work that regularly astonishes us. God’s power disrupts and heals and disturbs. David is now carried on the wave of this purpose and will receive God’s blessing and protection. When you find yourselves in the purposes of God rejoice. If you don’t, then fear that you may become a Saul, consumed in anger, going mad.

The focus of chapter 19 is of course on David and how he is protected from Saul’s desire to kill him. Michal covers for him when Saul’s soldiers come to kill him in the night. In chapter 20 we have Jonathon meeting David on the run and hiding in the fields and giving David a secret code. If he shots arrows and tells his boy that the arrows are farther on then it will be a sign that David is still in danger and he must go, away into hiding. When Saul tries to kill Jonathan, his own son, in a rage, then Jonathan knows that David needs to be told to flee and so he gives the coded message.

This is a sorry story of the consuming rage of jealousy.

*Martin Buber the Jewish philosopher, in one of those brief simple phrases which encapsulates a whole understanding of life, said ‘Real life is meeting’. It is in the encounter and relationships between persons that real human life is to be found. That encounter and those relationships may include conflict, the discovery of wills other than your own which call on you to see life from different viewpoint. You may of course be in position to impose your will and trample on the insights of other people. But the extent to which you do this is also the extent to which you will have refused human enrichment. You will have treated the other as a thing rather than as a person and you will have denied yourself ‘real life’ that is found in meeting.*

Jealousy and envy always has another person for its object. The deadliness of jealousy and envy is that it poisons the well. It is the injection of something deadly and destructive into the very veins of rich human life. There is a terrible moment in Shakespeare’s Othello when Iago confesses the force that drives him to his monstrous destruction of his general’s life and happiness.

*‘He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly’*

Jesus was crucified, the bible tells us because of the envy of the religious leaders of his time. They envied his goodness and his power. We can use the term envy in a light way ‘I envy her power to stay cool in a time of crises. You are in effect saying that you admire someone and wish you could enjoy the same virtues. Real envy and jealousy is destructive and is the ground for bitter resentment.

*Newspapers are full of jealousy. Gossip columnists spread their poisonous influence. They take some prominent figure in public life and try to demonstrate that they have feet of clay. Drag others down and diminish them. Their achievements and character may no more depress the reader or oppress them with how little they achieve, no disturb them with challenges to their laziness. They are a bit of a phoney, so all’s well; you can morally relax. This is the public use of envy and jealousy to make us all happier with our own failings.*

Harry Williams has said ‘envy like lust, is founded on my conviction that I lack something that the other person possesses and what makes me bitter is my conjecture that the other person is more abundantly alive than I am’.

Envy and jealousy consists in hating your neighbour, at least to the extent of ensuring as best you can, that they never get any benefit that may outshine or even equal yours, and never show any virtue that makes your life look ugly. In a profound sense envy and jealousy denies the very heart of the gospel.

The Christian answer will not be fully found in repentance but in seeking the grace and power of Jesus Christ to will the highest good of the person whom you are jealous of and envying towards. The greatest command, to love God and our neighbour, is the only cure for envy and jealousy, for by its very nature envy seeks to destroy neighbourliness and free, open and enriching human relationships. It is not repentance that is needed, so much as faith that Jesus got it right. That means the ways shown to us in the gospel, that true life is found in relationships of caring, is not what sinful humanity always fears. The fundamental deficiency has to be met. You need to know that God loves and values you as you are and you have to know the love of God for the person you envy and from that heart seek their best.

There is a Jewish parable about a farmer who one night was awakened by the angel of the Lord who said: ‘you’ve found favour in the eyes of the Lord. He wants to bless you, therefore make any three requests of God and he will be pleased to give them to you. There’s only one condition: your neighbour will get a double portion of everything that is given to you’.

The farmer was so startled by all this that he woke up his wife and told her all about it. She insisted that they put his to the test. So they prayed ‘O God if we could just have a herd of a thousand cattle that would enable us to break out of poverty in which we’ve lived for generations. That would be wonderful’.

No sooner had they said these words than they heard the sound of cattle noises outside. Lo and behold the house was surrounded by a thousand cattle during the next few days the farmer’s feet hardly touched the ground. He divided his time between prising God for his great generosity and making practical provisions for his newly found affluence.

A few days later he was up on a hill behind his house trying to decide where to put a new barn when he noticed his neighbour’s fields full of two thousand magnificent cattle. For the first time since the angel of the Lord had appeared his joy evaporated and a scowl of envy took its place. He went home in a foul mood, refused to eat supper and went to bed in a rage. Every time he closed his eyes he could see his neighbour’s two thousand head of cattle.

Deep in the night however he remembered the angel’s promise and said he could make three wishes. He shifted the focus away from his neighbour and back to his own situation. His old joy returned. Digging into to his own heart to find out what else he really wanted he began to realise that in addition to some kind of material security he had always wanted decedents to carry on his name. So he prayed a second time and asked God to give him a child.

It wasn’t long before his wife announced that she was pregnant. The next months were unbridled joy. The farmer was busy with his new found affluence and anticipation of having a child. When his child was born he took him to the synagogue and shared his good fortune with the gathered community. He had hardly sat down however when his neighbour stood up and said ‘God has indeed been gracious to our little community. I had twin sons born last night. Thanks are to God. On hearing that the farmer when home in a totally different mood from the one in which he had come. This time the dark mood of jealousy didn’t go away. Late in the evening he made a third request of God. ‘Lord, please gouge out my right eye’.

No sooner had he said these words than the angel who started the process came again. ‘Why son of Abraham, have you turned to such dark blessings?’

With pent up rage, the farmer replied, ‘I can’t stand to see my neighbour prosper! I’ll gladly sacrifice half my vision for the satisfaction of knowing that he’ll never be able to look on what he has’.

Those words were followed by a long silence, and as the farmer looked he saw tears forming in the eyes of the angel.

‘Why O son of Abraham, have you turned the occasion to bless into a time of hurting? Your third request will not be granted, not because the Lord lacks integrity, but because He is full of mercy. However, know this, O foolish one, you’ve brought sadness, not only to yourself, but to the very heart of God’.

We can all be miserable if we compare what we have with others. There will always be somebody with more than us, and there will always be someone less deserving. But jealously will rob us of our happiness and keep us from praising God for what he has given us. If we compare to those who have less we may become proud. If we compare to those who have more we may become resentful. Be aware and be thankful for what we are and what we have been called to do. Of course aspire and seek to do your best and prosper – but not through resenting what others have or what they are called to.

Good leaders will be inspired by others rather than resent others. Good leaders will lean from others not feel threatened by others. Good leaders will ensure they do what they are called to do to the best of their abilities and leave the rest to God, rather than constantly comparing ourselves to others.

May God protect us from jealousy and envy and keep us content and grateful for his love and provision for our lives.