**22nd February 2015**

**2 Samuel 11.1-15; 2 Samuel 11.26 – 12.13a**

Lent is always a time to consider our spiritual state, to do an audit of our soul and a bit of spiritual spring cleaning. As we move towards Easter how can we use this time to renew our faith, to revive our sous and to find fresh purpose and meaning for our lives.

Christianity Explored Course will take you through Mark’s Gospel during Lent and a chance to reconsider again the story fo Jesus and how it affects us. The Churches Together Lent Course based on the book musical and film of Victor Hugo’s Les Miserables engages with such important issues as forgiveness, salvation and redemption, morality, law and grace – issues which are at the heart of the gospel.

We have been looking at the story of David in our sermons this month and today’s passage tells of his sexual misconduct that led to disastrous effects and the turning point in his life. It raises issues of the consequences of our actions, can there be forgiveness and redemption, can David find release and a new beginning after his misdemeanours.

Let us first of all look at this ancient morality story and pull out some reflections.

In 2 Samuel 11 the army is away waging war in Trans Jordan, against the Ammonites. The army, and thus most of the young men, are out of Jerusalem. But David has not gone with his troops, he has ceased to be the king requested by Israel who would go out before us and fight our battles (1 Sam 8.20). He relies on his agents to do his work now. He is resting at home: he has time on his hands and as the old proverb goes the devil makes use for idle hands. The story of his liaison with Bathsheba follows. Little is said about Bathsheba, save for reference to her physical beauty. David asks her name, but he does not measure the cost of his desire. We do not know whether Bathsheba was caught by surprise, or had deliberately calculated that to bathe where she did was likely to attract the King’s attention. But attract his attention she does. David does not call her by name, doesn’t even speak to her. Like most lust there is no hint of caring, of affection, of love – only lust. At the end of the encounter in verse 5 she is only referred to as the woman. As always the story is told from a male viewpoint, and it is made very clear that to David at least the news of her pregnancy was unwelcome.

Bathsheba was a married woman, and so David’s first ploy is to have her husband, Uriah, a prominent member of the army, come back to Jerusalem. Perhaps if he slept with Bathsheba the child could be passed of as his. But Uriah either suspects something is afoot or is too naïve for his own good. How can he relax and sleep with his wife if his men are at the front being killed he says. Uriah’s words indict David. David even tries cynically to get him drunk in the hope that he’ll sleep with his wife. But Uriah is faithful and has the restraint and discipline of a dutiful soldier. It is a stunning moment of disclosure and contrast.

Desperate to protect his image, David compounds his sexual folly by arranging for Uriah to be killed in the fighting by having him put on the dangerous frontline. Lies, deceit, manipulation, even cynical gestures are all deployed in the great cover up.

Next week we will see some theological reflection on this story. But the story itself is told in a remarkably neutral way. The actions of the various characters are described without evaluation or criticism at this stage. Those who hear or read this story have to make their own decision about the morality of what is described. Some will surely find this to be a great relief; so much religious talk is enclosed in moralising. Some people, and particularly religious people, are the first to throw stones. Which is why Jesus always had a lot to say about hypocrisy and judge not less you be judged.

Like any story it can touch our own stories, and our own experiences. It can relate to our own hurt, our own failures. Our own temptations.

The other point that we must notice about the story, and indeed the whole of 2 Samuel 9-20, is the willingness of the storyteller to tell the story without feeling it necessary to put a gloss on David’s actions. He may be God’s chosen ruler, but in this account of his life he is as liable as any of his subjects to engage in actions that infringe any moral law. From this point on David is a transformed person. As King he can have whatever he wants, no restraint, no second thoughts, no reservations, no justification. He takes simply because he can. He is at the culmination of his enormous power. But then Bathsheba declares she is pregnant. David, like so many others, has his world shattered by the message. David had been in control. Now in an instant his control ends. Up to this point his story has been a story of blessing. Mostly David has not had to take. He has had everything gladly given to him by God, by Jonathon by his adoring followers. Now he grasps and takes. His lust for Bathsheba, his taking of her and his taking of Uriah. There is now an abrupt transition from a life under blessing to a life under curse.

The writer has written deeply of human foolishness, fear and fidelity. Like many events in life we wish they could be undone or untold. But David’s memory cannot be unwritten. Nor can many other people’s memories be unwritten. The story is a stark reminder of the consequences of sexual misconduct in particular and of the power of sexuality. Our sexuality can be a great blessing so long as it is channelled right. It can do great harm if it is not respected. We can’t excuse David’s actions, but we can learn from them and try to be on guard to our own temptations and weaknesses.

The second part of this story sees the confrontation of David with his actions, between what is right and wrong, exposing guilt and

seeking forgiveness.

At the end of the story in 1 Samuel 11 verse 27 we are told that the thing David did was wrong in the eyes of the Lord. Perhaps the writer wanted to make certain that readers and hearers got the message alright and that what David did was wrong.

There is much discussion in our society today about what is right and what is wrong. Can you have any absolutes. Are we all culturally relative. What was right a generation ago is wrong now and vice versa.

It is a hot potato is teaching – do you teach what is ‘right and wrong’ or do you encourage pupils to develop ‘secure values and beliefs’. The move reflects the multi-cultural and multi-faith landscape of Britain today, where values can be relative and subjective. I guess every generation has decided what is ‘morally acceptable’. Culture is always in a state of flux. This week sees the second part of our discussion on the same sex marriage issue – an issue that has seen a huge change in attitude in our society over the last generation. What we make of those changes, as Christians, is what we have been discussion and discerning. Biblical attitudes to sexuality change through the course of scripture – here David already has many wives and a fair number of concubines, women are regarded as possessions, and David’s sin is going to be that he took another man’s possession. The teaching of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament will offer a new sexual ethic. Culture does change one’s beliefs and understanding.

But you do need to know what your culture is and where your roots lie. The Bible says don’t despise the ancient paths, the wisdom of the ages. Bringing a child up in a faith can give those moorings, those roots. But for me religion is not just giving you a code of conduct. Good religion should make you compassionate, more honest with yourself, better able to forgive others and help you find acceptance, healing and hope. We play the God card as the arbiter of absolute values, the one who doesn’t change. Yet the God we believe in is also the God of love and grace.

In our society people who believe in God are often seen as needing a psychological crutch to lean on. So that when hard times come, when death itself has to be faced we have something to fall back on, to take the pain away, to indulge in delusion and escapism. .It stems from Freud the psycho analyst and others, who believed that God was make believe and that faith was believing in things that were untrue but gave you some comfort so that’s why you believe in them.

The people who hold such views about those of us who believe in God could equally be accused of the very same delusional thoughts. Their belief that there is no God may also be a comforting delusion, a flight from fantasy, a projection of the desire not to have to meet God one day and give an account of your life. For instance Polish Nobel Laureate, Czelaw Milosz , who was persecuted during the war by Stalin and the Nazis, wrote: ‘A true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death – the huge solace of thinking that our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders, we are not going to be judged’.

There is blind faith, faith that believes despite the evidence, but there is also evidence based faith, that believes in God because of what has been seen and experienced.

The question is still does God exist or not? If God does, then atheism is the delusion and there are absolutes.

When David heard the news of Uriah’s death he told his right hand man Joab, who had colluded in plotting his death, ‘not to let the matter distress him’. Another translation could be ‘do not let this thing be evil in your eyes – it is not evil in my eyes. The eyes of David and of Joab are not so discerning about what is morally acceptable. The seduction of power has skewed the moral vision of David. The king may act, the king may kill, the king may be self-satisfied. The king, however, is not capable of revising moral reality. The king may pretend he has escaped the rule of God and that he is an autonomous being and subject to no one, but in the end of the story, there is God with another moral vision. The story leaves us in no doubt that the eyes of God will out see the eyes of David. David may not see clearly, blinded as he is by fear, lust and power, but that does not change the moral reality to which David must answer. Most of our society lives without reference to God apart from the odd nagging echo or doubt that maybe there is a God. Helping people to discover God in their lives is a huge challenge. In the story of David, God sends Nathan the prophet to David to bring him to his senses.

Have you ever been asked to confront someone with an awkward truth? If so, then you will appreciate just how hard it is. I often skirt gingerly around the subject, treading on eggshells rather than cause offence, vainly hoping that the penny might drop. Occasionally, a softly, softly approach such as that may succeed but more often than not, it will fall on deaf ears. Sometimes it is better to speak the truth candidly. It may hurt, it may raise people’s hackles, even make an enemy for life, but, if it helps someone grow as an individual, it is ultimately a kindness.

Nathan had that sort of courage. The message God gave him to speak was not an easy one, almost bound to meet with a hostile reception, yet the words needed saying if David was to recognise the error of his ways and find forgiveness. Nathan also had imagination. Instead of starting with a direct accusation he used a parable to get David thinking through what he had done.

The parable is clear and simple. There were two men, one rich and one poor. The rich man has everything. The poor man only has a little female lamb. This was his only property – his whole livelihood. He treated the lamb like a treasured daughter.

The rich man needed lunch. He did not want to kill his own sheep so he took the poor man’s lamb. He took what was not his and treated it as if it were his own. In I Samuel chapter 8 the self centred King was anticipated as one who would ‘take’ what was not his. David had taken Bathsheba and had taken the life of Uriah. The rich man in the parable had taken the little lamb of the poor man. This was parable of cynicism, selfishness, destruction and greed.

Nathan’s story is told in such a way that in effect it demands an immediate response. King David asserts that justice must be done in such a case. The king, accustomed to conducting judicial procedure, indicts and sentences. Nathan’s response is brilliant: ‘You are the man!’ David is condemned out of his own mouth.

Nathan’s address is bold and direct. The story struggles with how truth shall speak to power. The parable is a good strategy, for it permits the king to draw his own unavoidable conclusion. Helping people think through what is right and wrong, the consequences of their actions, is often a better approach than just telling them what you think is right or wrong. David could discern the parable. What he does not discern is how the parable touches his own situation. But Nathan makes that clear. You are the man!

Nathan goes on to warn David of the disasters that now lie ahead (vs 10-12). All actions have consequences, even forgiven ones, and God did not rescue David from the mess he had got himself in. These consequences will be worked out in David’s life in due course. You can read the unpleasant details in the following chapters and how sexual sin and violence become endemic in David’s family.

The outcome of this story is that David acknowledges that he has done wrong. In verse 13 he confesses: I have sinned against the Lord. It is a remarkable statement. Nathan could have been eliminated like Uriah. But at the eleventh hour, David acknowledges himself still to be a child of God. It is before God first and fore most that he has sinned. He abandons his self autonomy and resubmits to God. He is then assured of God’s forgiveness.

David has shown a degree of moral courage and sensitivity in admitting his mistake and sin. How few powerful leaders can bring themselves to admit their mistakes? How few people can own up to their own foolishness and self-centredness. How few people face up to reality? We are caught up in a world were we are protecting ourselves, comparing ourselves to others, competing with others, that we are too insecure to admit weakness and failure. In prayer we can only come before God in all honesty. No pretensions, no cover up. And the truth can set us free!

But we also come before a God who loves us and offers us forgiveness when we are truly sorry. Though it is late in the story, it is not too late for David’s repentance. David is a man who is still willing and able to cast himself on God’s mercy. God extends mercy to such a person. That is the gospel: guilt leading to forgiveness; honesty leading to compassion.

Lord let us hear the sound of joy and gladness – create in us pure hearts and renew your spirit in us. Amen.