

Grand narratives

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Pentecost 8, 30 July 2006

2 Samuel 11: 1-15; Psalm 148; Ephesians 3: 14-21; John 6:1-21

In case you're wondering why I am back in the pulpit again so soon, it's because today is the anniversary of my first lectionary cycle. Three years ago, I gave my first ever sermon on the readings we've just heard. Rebecca was kind enough to allow me to mark this event by coming back. You'll be pleased to hear that I won't be giving that same sermon again! It is, though, appropriate to look again at its major theme — and that was how we approach Scripture.

Of course we all know Scripture is important. But have you ever had that experience of finding 'Bible Study' a little dry, irrelevant, or just left you feeling that you didn't 'get it'? If you have, then join the club — I admit, I have! But then I've also had some remarkable experiences with Scripture too that have left me totally astonished.

What's going on? Maybe one reason for this range of experiences is that Scripture works in many ways and on many levels. For today's purposes, I'm going to suggest that our personal engagement happens in four main ways, or levels:

1. We first engage at a **literal** level — we hear the story at its face value as an historic event that actually happened.
2. We often then tend to engage at an **ideas** level — we start to draw out lessons or principles about life, religion or whatever, mainly through by thinking about the text. (Sermons are usually a level 2 activity!)
3. Sometimes our **feelings** get involved — this happens when the story starts to mean something to us personally, or something kicks in at an emotional or psychological level.
4. If we're lucky, we will find ourselves engaging — or, perhaps more accurately, being engaged — at a **spiritual** level. We can find the story doing something to us at deeper levels of our being that we may not fully comprehend, find ourselves experiencing things we haven't experienced before.

Of course, this is all a bit arbitrary and artificial. But I've drawn things out like this in part because my impression is that what many people **want** from Scripture — particularly in our post-modern times — is more of the level 3 and 4 feeling and spiritual response stuff. But in practice we often find ourselves locked on to the 'story details and ideas' treadmill of levels 1 and 2.

At this point you may well say, even assuming this is true, **how** are we supposed to access these feeling and spiritual levels. Good question!

In my last sermon three years ago, I talked about the Benedictine approach to reading Scripture called *lectio divina* which I will briefly (and inadequately) summarise in a phrase as 'becoming very focussed on a small canvass, with lots of deep listening'.

Today, though, we're going to go in completely the opposite direction — and think about grand narratives. We'll be looking for emotional and spiritual depth in our wonderful Old Testament reading by considering David's 'Bathsheba Moment' in the context of the bigger story of his life.

Let's start out at level 1 with some of the juicy details of today's incident, although I'll already be trying to do this in a reflective, level 2, 'looking for lessons' kind of way.

First, we hear that during a spring military campaign king David has decided not to go out into the field to lead his troops (as he used to do in the gold old days). In fact he's back at the palace, and has even started taking afternoon naps. Is the warrior king getting soft?

Next David comes out onto a balcony and, in the balmy late afternoon sun, he sees a beautiful woman bathing, and presumably he looks on entranced. I think we're supposed to realise that this kind of voyeurism is at the very least dangerous. Because surely this is the point at which the chain of events that was about to follow could most easily have been stopped, but instead was indulged.

Then David goes out of his way to find out who she is. He has now actively sought out the object of his desire. The train wreck is probably now inevitable.

Then David specifically finds out that that she is Bathsheba and is married. He's being given an alarm, but he summons her anyway. No, don't do it! But yes, he sleeps with her.

It gets worse. David becomes deceptive. He tries both to cover up, and to buy off his guilt, by giving Bathsheba's husband Uriah some gifts. Uriah irritatingly behaves in a very appropriate and moral way. The foreigner (and a Hittite for heaven's sake!) thus totally shows up the great Hebrew King in virtue.

So what does David now do? It's all getting very awkward. He gets Uriah drunk, then deliberately arranges for him to be killed in a very clever, if devious, way. It's as though David's great skill as a politician and general have been warped to rather evil ends. And in a way that was maybe even designed to get David technically off the hook for not actually having done the killing itself.

So, a bit of serious level 1 listening, and sensitive level 2 thinking, already reveals this to be a very interesting, if sordid, tale. In fact, it's very tempting to stop here and start to do lots more good level 2 stuff. We could easily draw out all sorts of moral lessons about things like power and its ability to corrupt, about the way temptation works, about self control, and what happens when we get taken over by moods. And of course, there's always everyone's favourite — lust! :)

But since today we're mainly thinking about how to deepen our response via grand narratives we're going to slide over all that and instead move straight on to the bigger story of David's life.

Up until today the trend line in David's life has been pretty much consistently upwards. As you probably know, David, born the as the youngest shepherd son of Jesse has risen from being a no-one to being king. In getting to this point he's played many roles. He's been a shepherd, an archetypal hero, a favoured courtier of King Saul, the best friend of Jonathon, a general, a rebel. He was also pointedly devout, musical, beloved of the Lord, dancing and singing and getting prophets to give him guidance, and all that sort of good stuff. While David has faced setbacks and challenges along the way, he's met and overcome them all. These challenges included staring down some very serious temptations, notably to murder king Saul, which he could have easily done three times.

Then David has his Bathsheba Moment. Crash. Listening to his life this far really does make us wonder how this could have happened to someone who seemed to 'get' the moral nature of things?

Let's start by drawing what's perhaps the singly most obvious level 2 lesson, which is that even the greatest of us have weaknesses. As today's Psalm 14 puts it: "they have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, not one."

Yes, ok, but **why** do we go astray? That's what interests me. Well, maybe David's life tells us that we never **really** know what we are capable of when particular circumstances and conditions present themselves. We know David was capable of great rectitude, mindfulness and self control. But even he completely lost the plot on one golden evening when the woman of his dreams appeared before him, when his defences were down, and maybe when he was in some deluded mood that he was the untouchable master of the world because he was beloved of God. David shows us some of the inevitable limits of untransformed humanity and the dangers of success.

But I now find myself **feeling** my way into some uncomfortable level 3 territory. First, I notice that I am actually being quite judgemental about David — how could you, you who had been so righteous etc? But then I explore my own heart further. Yes, when circumstances and conditions are right (or wrong!) I am, and have, been capable of doing some really bad things. I really wonder whether I would fare much better than David if equivalent temptations presented themselves to me. And feeling my own reactions and judgementalism towards David further I see that yes, in all of that there is some projection down there of my own guilt and shame about lots of things, including sexual matters. And a fair dose of hypocrisy too. Then, reflecting a bit more on David's life, I realise that by this time he's probably over 50. So I wonder whether there is a touch of the mid-life crisis about his Bathsheba Moment? And in all this I now start to realise that another way I might respond to David's actions in relation to Bathsheba and Uriah is not only with judgement, but with **compassion**. All this is an interesting journey to suddenly find myself taking.

And now I find myself flicking back to level 2. Whatever the cause of David's lapse, maybe the question for me is, well, what am I to do about my own vulnerability? Part of the answer, I think, is to acknowledge it, to learn from what happened even to someone as great as David by pondering the gift of his story intimately and deeply, to try and stay humble, to learn about how I really work and what are my triggers, and to cultivate a deeply ingrained habit and attitude of watchfulness.

It's worth now taking a super-quick look at the rest of David's life. Today's story really was the big turning point because from here on there is a lot of suffering. After the pregnant Bathsheba moves in with David, he is visited by Nathan the prophet. Nathan points the finger at David about his crimes via an interesting story. (Come along to church next week to hear the details of this next exciting installment!). This hits David hard. Next David's first child by Bathsheba dies, despite a night long prayer vigil. Then a few of his other children by David's previous five wives (yes five!) become very unpleasant. One of them, Absalom, whom David loves dearly, deposes David, and David has to leave Jerusalem. When David eventually gets back control of Israel, this is at the cost of Absalom's life and he is devastated. David dies old, cold and, to me, seemingly lonely.

For me, all this deepens today's Bathsheba story. I find myself thinking about consequences in life and how they play out in unexpected and indirect ways. And indeed knowing the consequences adds an extra poignancy to the story of David's actions in murdering Uriah.

But for all that, David's second half is not a complete disaster. He keeps his throne. He keeps Bathsheba. He regains his Kingdom after Absalom almost took it. He writes some of his biggest, best and most important psalms as a result of these catastrophes. And you'd have to

say that maybe his range of suffering is maybe a large part of what broadens and deepens him as a person.

And telescoping out further let's us ponder some longer term consequences that have the capacity to take us to some level 4 spiritual responses — although these really do happen outside our control. A couple of extra facts : David and Bathsheba go on to have another child. Does anyone know who that second child was? It was a little boy called Solomon. Yes, King Solomon — the apex of Israel's worldly glory — was the child of Bathsheba. And perhaps even more spookily, in the listing of Jesus' own genealogy in chapter 1 of St Matthew's it describes how he is descended from David via Solomon's line and this **specifically** mentions the name of his mother — “the wife of Uriah” — so Bathsheba gets a guernsey (if by reference) in the gospels too!

So, as one of those historical “what-ifs” — what if David hadn't had his Bathsheba Moment : Would we have had Psalm 51, King Solomon, the Book of proverbs — or maybe even Jesus?

Old Testament grand narratives can run very deep. And, some might say, they are also morally ambiguous. Or maybe better, God manages to do some interesting things with our sins. Which is maybe one of the meanings of redemption.

Yes, it's all complicated and a bit hard to get under the surface of. A bit like life really. But perhaps you now get some sense of why I am loathe to settle for simple explanations or badly done Level 2 commentaries that tell me that passage X has meaning Y. We need to get personal with this stuff and **feel** our way into these complexities and ambiguities, and all the strains of the story including themes like suffering and redemption, because that's where I find some of the level 3 and maybe even level 4 stuff starting to happen for me.

But of course all layers of Scripture work together — and at the end of the day Scripture is only ever really illumined in our hearts by a movement of the Spirit working within us. That's why it's such a wonderful journey! Happy travelling!

That's it for the Sermon proper. But to suggest some further resonances in the way grand narratives can work once we start becoming sensitised to them, I'd like to play you a pop song that links with today's story in some unexpected ways.

The song's title is “Hallelujah”, but it's a long way from Handel's chorus of the same name!

I doubt that either the singer (K.D. Lang) or the writer (Leonard Cohen) are Christians. But it's interesting, if a little confronting, to hear how some of the elements of today's story get woven into a modern day take on the complexity of human sexuality and some of its attendant forms of suffering.

Messages aside, what's even more impressive perhaps is how K.D. Lang manages to sing that familiar word ‘Hallelujah’ in a range of very unfamiliar emotional colours I wouldn't have even dreamed of — including one of an almost strangled cry of pain. This is entirely appropriate because for me David's great life triumph was that he still found a way to praise God even when he found himself in the depths of despair.