

Reading: 2 Samuel 6: 1-23

Sermon

Well there is a huge amount in our reading for today which needs some unpacking. Names and events which might be unfamiliar to us. So, let's give this some background and context.

Cast your minds back to the days of Moses, acting on God's liberation of those enslaved in Egypt, leading them to a free life, which the people thought would be easy, but their journey to freedom turned out to be a long and hard road. God gave Moses instructions to keep them free and told Moses to inscribe them onto large pieces of stone – the Ten Commandments.

I'm not sure how portable these heavy tablets of stone were in practice for this bunch of nomads, but they carried them on their travels in a box, as a reminder that God was with them. And they needed this reminder because they constantly forget. This box was called the ark of God, sometimes referred to as the ark of the covenant. It was transported with the people on every step of the way until they reached the Promised Land.

We then hear virtually nothing about the ark, until several hundred years later, we find it in the temple where Samuel is living as a child.

Later, the Philistines steal the ark, but they experience so much pain and suffering after its capture they think it contains tremendous bad luck and give it back. The Israelites are delighted to have its return, but some of them decide to sneak a peek inside, and 70 of them are killed by the wrath of God we are told.

Shortly afterwards in the timeline of the bible, David, the second king of Israel appears (Saul being the first), plundering and pillaging foreign lands, bringing back booty as gifts, stolen bribes we'd call them, to those in power.

David knows the ark is a symbol of ancient power and wants a slice of that for himself, so he decides to reintroduce the ark to the people as a sign that he is the rightful king. Because the ark is all connected to the presence of God, it also indicates to the people that God is with David.

And this is the point we enter today's reading. The ark is being transported once again, placed on a cart and as it's moved, there's great fanfare; a carnival atmosphere with music and dancing.

But then, disaster strikes – as the cattle are pulling the cart, they stumble and the whole thing starts to wobble. Uzzah, with lightning speed reactions, cannot risk the ark tumbling down to the floor and shattering before their eyes, so reaches out his hands and steadies it. The ark isn't small or light, and he must have been in some danger of being crushed by it. I can imagine the gasp of the crowd and their instant relief that he saved the day.

But, and here's one of those really weird bits of the bible, God is furious with Uzzah for daring to touch the ark with his bare hands and kills him. I wish I could provide you with a reasonable explanation of this inexcusable overreaction. If you were to ask the average person to sum up the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, most people would talk about the violent wrath of God, smiting enemies in the Old, and loving enemies through Jesus in the New. I have always pushed back at this narrative, because there are not two different versions of God – God in the Jewish Scriptures, what we refer to as the

Old Testament, is a God of creative love, a God who seeks freedom and liberation for all who suffer, who is constantly exploring new ways of strengthening the relationship with humanity.

But this episode with Uzzah, and the 70 Israelites before him, undoes some of that. Because God appears like a narcissistic despot, easily offended over minor screwups.

The only redeeming feature I can muster here, is that God is demonstrating to David not to mistreat that which is sacred. David is using the Ark for his own glory after all, whipping the people up into a frenzy, and maybe God is showing David an intolerance for him playing fast and loose with that which is holy. David, we are told, was afraid of God, having witnessed the death of Uzzah, perhaps because he knew how close he comes to upsetting God most of the time. Why it is that Uzzah suffers this fate and not David remains deeply problematic, because Uzzah treats the Ark with enormous respect.

We have to remember that the history of God's people is written through the eyes of those with vastly different experiences from our own. They treat God as being remote and uninterested in their lives, always anticipating God to be tetchy and judgemental. And the scriptures are written through this lens of expectation. It is possible that the shock of events caused Uzzah to suffer a heart attack and the people assumed his death was God's anger. What comes across to me is despite this assumption of punishment, God has to constantly remind that people of mercy and forgiveness and liberation and love. And these are constantly emerging from behind words that tell of a God who is none of these things.

We do the same of course. We speak of judgement and punishment. We speak of not being worthy, of us being more full of sin than goodness. And I believe God is having none of that. Wants us to resist that narrative of a God of wrath and instead ONLY speak of God's capacity for love and forgiveness, of the reckless extravagance of love and forgiveness that accepts the very worst of who we are.

In a few minutes we're going to sing In Christ Alone. It's a controversial modern hymn because of the line: *till on the cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied*. It used to make me wince and refuse to sing it. The author, Keith Getty, has faced criticism and challenge over that line and calls for him to change it. But he has always refused. A friend of mine used to change the word wrath to love – on the cross the love of God was satisfied. And on first appearance that seems to make more sense. But actually what it being said here is that the cross obliterates any residual anger we attribute to God. That we have wrongly talked about God's wrath, but after the cross, no more. There should never be any more talk about wrath and smiting and the violent retribution of God. Because the cross is a million miles away from that. The cross shows us that God was willing to give up power because we are loved so much. There is no room on the cross for anger, only love.

Back to our story...because David has had a wake-up call, rather than taking the Ark straight to Jerusalem, he leaves it for 3 months at the house of Obed-Edom, to see whether God continues to be furious. David isn't brave enough to continue carrying the Ark just in case of risky consequences. But God blesses Obed-Edom, and David returns to collect the Ark, thinking by now God's calmed down a bit.

And so the Ark gets moved once again, and David insists on a huge festival of food and celebration. David leads the procession, leaping and dancing and wearing a linen ephod. Now, there is much dispute about what an *ephod* actually was – some think it was a sort of

breastplate worn by priests, a religious garment with different coloured yarns. But there is another theory, that it was like a G-string. Something rather skimpy and revealing. David is a handsome chap, not tall, we're told, but hench. Is it his vanity that gives rise to this choice of outfit, that prudish Michal chastises him for cavorting undressed in front of the young women kept as slaves, whose gaze should be averted. Although the text doesn't tell us here, Michal is actually one of David's wives, given to David by Saul, her father, the previous king. Is jealousy her motivation for speaking out? That others would desire his body?

There's a whole other sermon here about what we consider appropriate clothing, how we judge people by their outfits, more usually women of course. And the beauty of the human form, and how much we despise the flesh, its desires, its exposure. I have yet to meet anyone with zero body image issues, and how damaging that is to us. There's also something else here about how Michal is treated – like many women of her time – handed over as a possession with no agency over her body, seeing David do what he likes with his own.

But Michal's criticism isn't just of David's attire – it's of his grandiose display of power. David fronts up to her. Tells her he's been made king by God and everything he does is to honour God and that she doesn't understand him. She doesn't, it's true. They argue and David tells her – actually I can hear him shouting at her, that these slave women honour him more than she does, and he'll carry on behaving in a way she thinks is contemptable, and he'll do even worse than that. And the story ends with us being told Michal remains childless. Does David stop sleeping with her as a punishment? Women who didn't bear children were judged harshly because they were considered pointless.

After marrying Michal, David woos and marries 6 more women and has six sons from them, daughters rarely worth a mention, and later 11 more sons from a series of unnamed wives and concubines. And that's even before we get to Bathsheba. If anyone ever asks you about what biblical marriage looks like, it's worth pointing out David.

I think it's fair to say David is a complicated character. I do believe he acts with the motivation to serve God, with gratitude of the position bestowed on him by God. But his decisions are not entirely altruistic. The events may give glory to God, but they also give glory to David too.

So what's in this ancient, exotic tale for us?

I think there's something here about how we treat the presence of God. I'm uncomfortable with the concept of God's presence being confined to a box that can be carried around, as if God's presence is located in just one place, but it was a visible reminder to the people. How do we treat God's presence? How are we reminded of it?

How do we speak of God's character? And are we afraid of God, like David? There are occasions in the bible when we are told to fear God, but far more often we hear messages not to be afraid of God's presence. And so I think there's something in this story about us noticing, about us acknowledging the holy and sacred nature of God, of not domesticating God, of treating God as the mysterious and unknowable presence and that can be disconcerting, whilst holding onto those aspects of God's nature which are repeated over and over; love, mercy, forgiveness – these elements of God's nature are so much more prevalent than God's anger. And how often do we wrongly attribute events to God's anger, that bad things which happen are somehow God's punishment. I do not believe God ever wills us

harm. God seeks the best for each of us. The cross is a demonstration of love, not anger. It was anger and hatred and violence which put Jesus on the cross, by men's abuse of power, but none of those exist within the nature of God.

I find it fascinating that when we're considering the Ark of God, just a few weeks ago the US state of Louisiana passed a law requiring all school classrooms to display the Ten Commandments. Louisiana is one of many states that permit the death penalty, that has approved criminalising morning after pills following a near total ban on abortion and where doctors are confused about whether they are legally permitted to terminate a pregnancy that otherwise would result in the death of the mother – why is that even questioned -and Louisiana has the worst rating of social justice in the whole of the United States. Displaying the Ten Commandments is an empty gesture if you neglect those who are marginalised and suffering, and the bible has strong words to say about virtual signalling. I think this story in the second book of Samuel points out the hypocrisy of empty gestures, of how we treat the covenant instituted by God and use it for our own ends. How we pick and choose what bits to follow, and ignore the inconvenient parts of scripture which transparently speaks about the requirement to love our enemies and care for the poor and the foreigner. The Ten Commandments is about freedom to live in the grace of God, not a prohibitive list to weaponize.

And finally, I think there's something in this story about how we treat those voices which challenge us? Michal questioned David's motivations, and perhaps his reaction showed she'd touched a raw nerve, exposed a truth. Our motivations won't always be pure and holy and good, but how do we treat those who shine a light on them? We all need people in our lives to keep us grounded, stop us from being narcissistic. And equally we all need people in our lives to provide us with validation, stop our self-esteem from plummeting.

It's easy to think these ancient stories are from a by-gone era from foreign lands with no relevance to our lives. But there is deep wisdom contained within these words, and we find they shine a mirror on us, with characters who behave in similar ways to us. And most importantly we find God is not done speaking through them. We should be unafraid to shake them about a bit and see what new truths fall from their pages. Amen