**Bring back the young man Absalom** 18/6/23 dkm

Read: 2Samuel 14,

Text: 2Samuel 14

Psalms: 1, 58, 112, 72old

The average prison sentence for murder in NSW is 10-12years and for rape 2years; the maximum sentences are life and 14years respectively. These are the statistics, but sometimes it seems murderers literally, ‘get away with murder’. The thing about murder is that the victim has no voice; with rape there are two voices to be heard. With murder it may be premeditated or not premeditated; the latter we call manslaughter. A person may also kill in self-defence, something defence lawyers look for, along with mental illness.

While much of our criminal code was originally drawn from the Bible, there is little overlap today. God declared to Noah, ‘Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God he made man’ (Gen 9:6). The Law of Moses stipulated the death penalty for pre-meditated murder, but set apart cities of refuge for murderers who ‘did not lie in wait’ (Exod 21:12, 13). It also carried the death penalty for other crimes, including adultery, and rape if it was adulterous or incestuous. A kinsman-redeemer or avenger of blood was obliged to enact the death penalty, but when the monarchy was established matters were brought before the king. In the NT we are told that the ruler or governing authority ‘does not bear the sword in vain’ (Rom 13:4).

The sword had struck in David’s family, just as the prophet had said (12:10). King David himself was guilty of murder, as well as adultery. When he repented the Lord put away his sin and he did not die, but the Lord struck his newborn, and he would live with rebellion and violence in his own house. Already his third son had killed his eldest son, ostensibly for raping his sister. That rape was punishable by death under the law (Lev 20:17), but their father David, who was also judge of all Israel, did nothing except get very angry (13:21).

When Absalom murdered his brother Amnon, David did nothing either, except weep and mourn. But Absalom fled to his mother’s family home where he stayed for three years (13:36, 37). He fled because he feared judgment, as in execution, at the hands of the king, his father David (14:32). But David made no attempt to deliver justice for his murdered son Amnon; he simply mourned him until he was ‘comforted concerning Amnon, because he was dead’ (13:39). Did David think that with time all his problems would go away? Matters of justice do not just ‘go away’. Absalom was still alive even if in exile. David longed to see his living son, but as king he knew he should be delivering justice for his dead son. Conflict of interest is nothing new!

David’s feelings towards Absalom were noticed by Joab, who set about trying to reconcile father and son. It was in his own interest to do so and avoid a civil war. David was getting older and Joab wanted a smooth transition of power so he could keep his job. Our subheadings are: ‘Listen to a wise woman’, ‘Let Absalom return’ and, ‘Let me see the king’s face’.

**1. Listen to a wise woman**

We notice something missing in David’s responses to the tragedies in his family. He got ‘very angry’ and he ‘wept very bitterly’, but he did not pray or call upon the prophet of God. Rather, he listened to a woman brought from Tekoa by Joab. She is called a ‘wise woman’ but while reading this story I thought back to the woman King Saul consulted, the medium at En Dor! This woman from Tekoa was certainly clever, but was her wisdom ‘from above’ or ‘earthly’ (James 3:15). Joab sent her because of her skills as an actor and a lawyer. He told her to pretend to be in mourning, to dress in torn clothes and look dirty. Joab also told her what to say to King David; he had learnt from Nathan the prophet the art of the parable. The woman turns out to be a very clever actor!

This woman from Tekoa went to the king and fell down before him. It is hard to ignore an old woman clutching your feet and crying for help- I know this from personal experience in India. The king responded, asking her to explain her problem. He was the ‘supreme court’ of Israel; even if she should have approached local elders first, the king could not turn her away. In fact, she made out her problem was with the local elders. Her story was that she was a widow with two sons. These two sons got into a fight where no one could stop them, and one struck the other and killed him (14:6). Naturally, the family or clan wanted justice, namely the death penalty according to the law. The woman feigned distress that no ‘ember’ would be left in her family, no one to carry on the family name; inheritance of a family name and estate was important in Israel (14:7). Moreover, the lot of a childless widow was not a happy one! After hearing the woman’s’ story, David tried to send her home with his decision pending (14:8).

The woman however, wanted an immediate answer, and a favourable one at that. She assured David that she would bear the blame for any lack of punishment, not him (14:9). David relented and promised to deal with anyone who spoke to her or touched her (14:10). But what about her imaginary son who was guilty of murder? He was in danger from the ‘avenger of blood’ according to the law of ‘the Lord your God’ (14:11). Reminding David of the law was rather bold but her whole aim, or that of Joab, was to get David to rule contrary to the law. David is trapped into making a ruling, and he does so with an oath: ‘As the Lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground’. She set the trap and it sprung closed on David. This was another, ‘You are the man’ moment!

The woman was pleased with the outcome of her meeting with the king thus far, but she presses on to the end planned by Joab: ‘Please let your maidservant speak another word to my Lord the king’ (14:12). She now says that the king is guilty of not bringing Absalom, the now crown prince, home. This was a matter that impacted the nation not just the family. She reasons that all die in the end, and water spilled cannot be gathered up again (14:13); in other words, ‘Don’t cry over spilled milk’, just get on with life. This woman could be listed with secular humanists of our day! Her ‘earthly’ wisdom undermines the law of God. God is merciful, but he is also just, which is the message of the cross of course. She unashamedly assures David that God wants him to bring Absalom home (14:14). The woman returns to her original story, thanking David that he has listened to her and given her words of comfort, like an angel of God discerning good and evil, and blessing him. Her flattery was working well-or was it irony!

The reference to his banished son made David suspicious of this woman and her motives. So he confronts her with the question, ‘Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?’, and she does not deny that Joab had put all these words in her mouth (14:19). He did so to bring about a change of affairs between David and his son Absalom. She answered David with more flattery, and irony, saying that he will act wisely and make the right decision, the decision she cleverly trapped him into making (14:20).

**2. Let Absalom return to his own house**

Joab appeared on the scene as soon as the wise woman left- or was he in the wings all along? Having just heard that Joab was behind the whole performance, David basically admits defeat: ‘All right, I have granted this thing. Go therefore, and bring back the young man Absalom’ (14:21). For his part, Joab was greatly relieved. He bowed and thanked the king. He wasted no time in going to Geshur to fetch Absalom and bring him back to Jerusalem. Clearly, he had been in contact with Absalom during the last two years even if his father, the king, had not.

But things did not go as Joab or Absalom had hoped. The king gave permission for Absalom to return to Jerusalem but only to his own house. He was not allowed to meet with his father. Absalom was not at all happy with this situation, as we will now see. Clearly his father was not ready for reconciliation with his son. He was torn between wanting to see his son, and executing justice, as he was obliged to do as king. If it had been anyone else who murdered his son Amnon, David would have dealt with them according to the law of the Lord. Yet he could not bring himself to dealing with his son according to the law. He must have forgotten the story of Eli, the priest who God judged for honouring his sons more than the Lord (1Samuel 2:29, 30).

**3. Let me see the king’s face**

David was a man after God’s own heart who ruled Israel with power, with authority, and up till now, with justice. After he sinned he appears to have lost authority within his own family, even though God forgave his sin. His eldest son, a rapist, had been murdered by his third son, ostensibly out of revenge for this rape, after two years of plotting; the second son must have died in his youth (3:3). A person who plots revenge for two years has to be determined and deceitful (cf. 13:22).

We now learn more about Absalom, especially his physical appearance (14:25, 26). Everyone in Israel praised him for his good looks, an ominous reminder of King Saul (1Sam 9:2). Such praise was sure to ‘go to his head’ as we say. Absalom knew he was handsome, especially with his thick, long hair, which he cut once a year because it got heavy. The writer tells us the weight of his ‘shorn fleece’ was 2.5kg. This long hair will feature in Absalom’s eventual death, but for now it is his crowning glory. Is long hair in fashion today? It became so in my youth, and elders in the church became very critical; although in years gone by elders in the church had long hair! What matters of course, is how long the person spends in front of the mirror, not how long their hair is. Absalom had three sons and a daughter, whom he named Tamar because she was beautiful (14:27). His sons must have died in their youth because when he set up a monument to himself he said he had no son (18:18). We are not told anything about Absalom’s heart.

Although living in the same royal compound, two years passed without Absalom seeing the king’s face (14:28). Absalom was seeing lots of people but not his own father. We are already observing him to be a proud and arrogant young man. He got angry at being given ‘the cold shoulder’, at being ostracised within his own family. Finally, he called Joab to come so he could send him to the king. As David’s general, Joab answered to David and no one else. He had of course, supported Absalom in his desire to return home, but did not respond to being summoned by one of Absalom’s servants. When, after a second summons, Joab still did not come, Absalom resorted to criminal means to get his attention; he had his servants torch Joab’s barley crop (14:30). This brought Joab to his door but did nothing to improve his relationship with this powerful general. Joab would one day thrust three spears through Absalom’s heart (18:14).

When Joab came Absalom made no apology for torching his crop. He more or less blamed Joab for bringing him from Geshur to Jerusalem. He told him to go to the king, asking why he refused to see him after bringing him back to Jerusalem. He demanded to see the king face to face whatever the consequences: ‘If I am guilty of anything, let him put me to death’ (14:32 NIV). He showed no repentance for murdering his brother. He was defiant in demanding either full pardon and restoration, or death. He would no doubt have had questions for David to answer at any face to face meeting, questions such as, how come his brother was not punished for raping his sister.

Joab knew a meeting between David and Absalom would not be easy, especially after getting a taste of Absalom’s arson, but agreed to take Absalom’s message to the king. The king agreed to a meeting with Absalom. When Absalom came he bowed with his face to the ground before the king (14:33). Was this anything more than royal protocol? ‘Then the king kissed Absalom’ (14:33). With such a brief report of the meeting in this abrupt ending to the chapter, can we conclude anything more than ‘royal protocol’ again? The kiss was probably more formal than felt. Joab’s mediation was good as far as it went, but more was necessary, as the next chapter shows. How thankful we are that God has provided a mediator between sinners like us and Himself, whose face we would never see without the only mediator between God and man, the Lord Jesus Christ.