**Absalom’s rebellion** 25/6/23 dkm

Read: 2Samuel 15

Text: 2Samuel 15:1-18

Psalms: 3,41:4-13, 55:1-3&9-14, 134a

Politicians work hard to get people to vote for them. Sometimes they come up with policies that people like, but other times they resort to promises of more money in people’s pockets. Sometimes they actually put money in people’s pockets, as recently seen in Turkey, and as often seen in India. Only the ruling party can afford to buy votes in this way. Absalom could not afford to buy votes; there was no election in sight anyway! Instead he came up with a clever scheme to steal the hearts of the people before launching a coup *de tat*. Clearly, the kiss of the king at their last face to face meeting did not point to any reconciliation between father and son, between king and crown prince (14:33). Our subheading are: ‘Flattery gains a following’, ‘Followers called to Hebron’, and ‘Flight of King David’.

**1. Flattery gains a following**

Absalom was the third son of King David, and now the son next in line to the throne. But he had been ostracised by his father since he murdered his elder brother Amnon. David’s failure to deliver justice within his own family contributed to the frustration felt by Absalom. Absalom was a handsome fellow with a ‘swelled head’, so it seems. We know little about what was in his heart but we now learn what was in his head. In politics and in every way of life, even in the church, we must try to discern what is in a person’s heart. We generally have no trouble learning what is in their head. Although their actual display of knowledge may be a sign of what is in their heart!

Absalom’s first act of rebellion was to provide himself with a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him (15:1). Chariots were popular with the Philistines but not in the hills of Israel; there is no record of David getting around in a chariot. Absalom saw this war-machine a symbol of prestige and power. Fifty men were not sufficient to launch a rebellion or coup, but it was a start.

How would Absalom increase his following? He came up with a clever idea; he would exploit an apparent weakness in his father’s administration. The ‘weakness’ demonstrated by David with regard to administering justice in his own family extended to the whole population, although in a different way. The people were not getting justice because the judge, the king was overwhelmed with cases; so Absalom observed, although the woman from Tekoa did not seem to have a problem in approaching David.

Absalom decided to intercept people as they came to the king with their cases to be settled. He would get up early and go to the city gate. As people came with their lawsuits for the king to give a just decision, Absalom called them aside and asked where they were from. After this friendly question, and presumably a question about their lawsuit, he told them that their case was valid and proper but that the king was not free to hear them, and that he had not appointed any deputy- apart from Absalom it would seem! As the people went away assured of the ‘rightness’ of their case, Absalom would quickly add, ‘Oh, that I were made judge in the land’ (15:4). He promised to solve all their problems, and that in a favourable manner, if they supported him. I wonder who taught Absalom politics- the devil?

Absalom’s clever politicking at the city gate included a warm welcome. Everyone knew he was the king’s son and bowed as they came towards him, thinking he was serving the king. Absalom was quick to take their hand to kiss as they bowed before him. If they were carrying a baby he would probably have held this also, as our politicians tend to do! After some years of endearing himself to the people in this way, ‘Absalom had stolen the hearts of the men of Israel’ (15:6). These words sound ominous, and are ominous in terms of Absalom’s rebellion.

David his father was a very popular king, although the scandal within the royal family may have lessened his popularity. His son sitting at the city gate endearing himself to the people did not improve David’s popularity. The hearts stolen by Absalom were hearts that once belonged to David his father. Absalom knew he would have to become more popular than his father if he was to overthrow the king. It would take time, but the time would come.

**2. Followers called to Hebron**

When Absalom decided the time had come for him to launch his coup, he asked the king’s permission to go to Hebron to pay a vow he had made to the Lord while in exile in Geshur (15:7, 8). Was this the truth? Most probably not, because there is no indication of Absalom ever wanting to serve anyone but himself. But David does not question his son regarding his vow and his need to go to Hebron at this time. ‘God in peace’ he said to him, when peace was the last thing on Absalom’s mind. Hebron was the place of Absalom’s birth, and the place from which David began his rule, so it was strategic for Absalom as he planned his rebellion. Most translations of the Bible have Absalom launching his coup after four years rather than forty years, as we have in the NKJV; David’s only reigned for forty years (5:4).

Having stolen the hearts of the men of Israel, now was the time for Absalom to capitalise on all his political hard work. He sent spies into all the tribes of Israel to sound the trumpet and announce, ‘Absalom reigns in Hebron’ (15:10). From Jerusalem had come two hundred men, presumably men who knew Absalom but knew nothing about his evil plans (15:11). They thought they were joining him for a religious ceremony. The initial twenty had grown to this two hundred, a tenfold increase, and by the time they came from the various tribes the increase would have been over a hundred fold.

One of the key defectors was Ahithophel the Gilonite, David’s counsellor from Giloh (15:12). Did Ahithophel go to Hebron innocently like the others? Ahithophel was in fact the grandfather of Bathsheba (23:34), so had reason to rejoice in David’s downfall. In Psalm 3, penned by David as he fled from Absalom, he laments that many had risen up against him, even men close to him. Absalom was the closet of course, but Ahithophel was his counsellor, his close advisor (cf. Ps 41:9).

**3. Flight of King David**

When an informant came to David telling him his son’s rebellion, David appears to have been taken by surprise (15:13). The message was simple: ‘The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom’. How could David have been so blind as not to see what Absalom had been up to the past four years, parading about in his chariot, politicking at the front gate and then pretending he needed to worship the Lord in Hebron? As a young man David was always a step ahead of King Saul who was trying to kill him, but as an old man he was a step behind his own son, Absalom. Giving him a name meaning ‘man of peace’, and sending him off to Hebron ‘in peace’ were grave mistakes on David’s part.

Most sons, thankfully, are loyal to their father, but not Absalom. He despised his father and could not wait to take the throne of Israel from him. Absalom’s knowledge of the Bible was scant; he was ignorant of the fifth commandment: ‘Honour your father and your mother… that your days may be long, and that it may well with you’ (Deut 5:16). How many sons and daughters have come under the condemnation of this commandment? Absalom certainly did, as we will see. But for now he seems to be successful in his rebellion.

It is interesting, and also instructive, that David decided to flee the city (15:14). Firstly, we note that he could no longer remain passive; he was forced to do something. Everyone will be forced to act one day, and even now as death hangs over our heads. We can remain as we are and die, or we can flee to the arms of Christ and live. If David had stayed in the city someone would have died, and it may have been him, although he was once a skilful warrior. David wanted to avoid death and the death of his son. He wanted to avoid bloodshed altogether (15:14). David’s ability to make decisions returned. He decided to commit himself and his ways into the hands of the Lord by fleeing the city.

As believers we must learn to commit our ways into the Lord’s hands. Let us not think we have to stand and fight, even if we are in the right. Children are given conflicting messages about dealing with bullies in the schoolyard. Stand and fight some adults tell them. Others tell them to run away and face the shame. We should tell them to commit their way to the Lord, who is able to put the shame upon the bully, or make him or her feel guilty for their behaviour. While the world speaks about shaming certain people, the Bible tells about a king who, rather than fight his enemy, took the shame upon himself. More than David, that king was Jesus, ‘Who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God’ (Heb 12:2).

Jesus showed us another way, the way of loving your neighbour and even your enemy, rather than hating and seeking revenge upon those who speak or act against you. Remember, ‘Vengeance is mine. I will repay’ says the Lord (Rom 12:19). By all means speak to such a person, but then remember, ‘A soft answer turns away wrath’ (Prov 15:1).

Having learned that Absalom was plotting a coup, David hastily arranged to flee the city from which he ruled all Israel, and the city which was the centre of worship in Israel. He still had many loyal servants whom we will meet in due time, servants ready to do whatever the king commanded (15:15). David and his servants left the capital and were leaving the country. Before crossing the Kedron valley that runs north -south immediately east of Jerusalem, David stopped to let his servants go ahead. These servants were actually his body guard of elite foreign mercenaries. They included six hundred Philistines who had followed him from Gath, men more loyal than his own son (15:18).

For some reason David left ten women, concubines, behind in palace. The reason given is, ‘to keep the house’ (15:16). Remembering the prophetic words of Nathan (12:11), and knowing what lies ahead, a red flag is raised as we read this verse. What was David thinking? In the first place, these women were probably from Jerusalem. When David came to Jerusalem he took concubines as well as wives from Jerusalem; they were Jebusites (5:13). Secondly, it would have been safer for women than men when Absalom took over then palace, or so David thought. The third reason he left ten concubines behind was that prophecy might be fulfilled, God sovereignly ordaining whatsoever comes to pass (Shorter Catechism Q 7).

Should David have been more attentive to the words of the prophet? As I have said before, ‘Who are we to judge?’ We have been learning from David’s example, both his faithfulness and obedience to God’s word, although latterly from his disobedience to the Lord’s commands. If we consider David to be a failure as a father, let us learn from him. Let us not fail to exercise discipline, loving discipline, and justice within our family. Being a father or mother requires more wisdom and prayer than running the country!

If we think David should have paid more heed to the prophecy of Nathan, then let us pay more heed to the prophecy of Scripture ourselves. Many prophesies have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ; these we must understand and must believe in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Other prophecies are yet to be fulfilled. Let us know these also, and focus on them, because they will also be fulfilled in Jesus Christ when he returns to judge this world in righteousness.