Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

24th June 2012



1 Samuel 17: 1, 32-49, Psalm 9, 2 Corinthians 6: 1-13, Mark 4:35-41

The first reading presents us with a story that is set in a tense landscape. The battle is set, the armies are gathered and facing each other; and the Philistines had set their champion out in front, a giant and a warrior since his youth. This invites the armies of Israel to accept the challenge by providing their own champion to settle the dispute in one-to-one combat between the two champions, rather than a full-scale battle between the two confronting armies

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If we read this story with our Christian blinkers on, we will be seeking with an orientation toward the Christ. And of course we will find it. For Jesus is the Son of David , the root Jesse; and in one of the advent antiphons we sing:
O Root of Jesse, you stand as a sign for the peoples; before you kings shall keep silence and to you all nations shall have recourse. Come, save us, and do not delay.

We have taken this battle scene and read into it a prefiguring of the Christ and of the activity of salvation. The son of Jesse (David) is greater than the King (Saul) and saves God's people (Israel) by putting evil (Goliath) to death for good. If we read this with Christian blinkers, we readily see evidence for the coming of Christ and we underline the Divine power that we have invested in Christ.

That reading does serve a purpose and it holds a truthful orientation, but it is also somewhat limited by our blinkered vision. To take off the blinkers we might choose another text altogether, one from another, equally blinkered, tradition. In the Hindu scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita presents us with a landscape. This landscape is within the epic tale of the Mahabharata, another story about another ancient people. The context of the Gita is a conversation between Krishna, a deity who is often described as an infant or young boy playing a flute, and the Pandava prince, Arjuna. This conversation takes place in the middle of the battlefield before the start of the Kurukshetra War with armies on both sides ready to battle. In reading the Gita we see another setting for the divine truth being revealed, and in this particular instance we see that the chosen landscape of the Gita parallels the landscape of today's reading from 1 Samuel. When we go back to the first reading with a broader vision we might be open to a view that has more to reveal than an early telling of Christ's coming activity.

The lectionary gives us another link to explore for it has linked the first reading with the gospel, purely by setting them together on the same Sunday. And that presents us

with another landscape, and it is a landscape with once again two sides. This time instead of two confronting armies and the action taking place in the impending chaos between them, we have two shores and the chaotic sea in between. It is as if the activity taking place in the landscape has been turned upside down! David & Saul, David and Goliath, Krishna and Arjuna and now Jesus and the disciples all engage in a dialogue that takes place "in between". In all three narratives the dialogue is associated with the chaos that is to be found in that place of *in between*.

On Wednesday last week we experienced one of the gentlest "in between" places; many would have missed it. The longest night or shortest day stands in between the seasons of the Sun and heralds the coming of light. Birthed in the darkness the light seems to shift and then grows toward the brightness of spring and summer. And those who didn't miss the movement may have reflected on the seasons of the soul, and the movement of Divine light that seeks to be birthed from the darkness within ourselves.

Our daily life gives us another lectionary, for life itself is a collection of scripture readings, divine stories that are appointed or ordered for worship. And when we now approach today's readings without the blinkers of our initial reading we see that 1 Samuel, the Gita and the gospel all invite us to become aware of where we stand. They invite us to look into the impending chaos that is the tension between competing forces; and they invite us to look into the chaotic storms that can erupt in our lives as we move from shore to shore.

If we place ourselves into the landscape of 1 Samuel, we might become aware of the armies that face each other on either side. For in today's world there are many competing forces and these will create the tension and the demands that are there to be found in the Battlefield at Socoh. And if we choose not to be mindful of such forces then we choose also not to participate in the creative activity that is God's blessing in the midst of such tension. We allow the battle to take place and allow the forces to destroy each other.

We might wonder at the popularity of sport, and it has been said that sport offers a civilised way of exercising the desire for confrontation. When we look again at the landscape of war in 1 Samuel, we see no options for civilised exercise, rather we see in David a passion for bringing the confrontation to an end. And so we do see a prefiguring of Christ, and we might also glimpse a prefiguring of ourselves, living in the Divine presence.

If we place ourselves into the gospel storm of Mark's gospel, we most likely will see ourselves as the disciples on the boat, afraid and of little faith. However, as mentioned earlier, this narrative is like an upside down version of the first story; in fact it is of a quite different paradigm. We can place ourselves in between in the forces when we enter the first narrative, and we can feel the tension of the two gathered armies and feel ourselves holding the tension in the middle, either as David or as Saul. But the gospel narrative is of a different order. In the gospel we should put ourselves in the picture as the boat, and then look within ourselves to see the activity taking place. For

Christ reveals the Divine incarnate, and so too the Divine within. Alongside the fear that confronts us in the chaos of the storm is the power to still the very same, most likely to be found asleep in the stern.

The privilege of priesthood is the invitation to join with others in these places, to stand with those on the battlefield where the army of grief seeks to destroy the army of new life, to be in the boat when the diagnosis is the storm of cancer that seeks to swamp the very boat that carries life's journey from one shore to another. And also to celebrate in baptism the anointing of a David, a new king, and a new hope. Each of us, all of us, are invited into that same sharing. And our first tentative step is to remove the blinkers that hide the fullness of life from our eyes, and then to see ourselves in the narrative of Holy Scripture.
Rather than seeking to explain these stories and sum them up into a neat piece of theological direction, we might take them to bed with us and dream ourselves into them. Or we might prayerfully imagine ourselves in the landscapes that are presented and see if we can identify the places and the activity and the inhabitants of the narrative in our own day-to-day places.

In the seasons of our soul there is an eternal solstice, for the light is constantly seeking itself. The Longest night is only the place of birth for the rising son.

The Lord be with you
Peter Humphris