

**Sermon preached the Rt Rev. Njongokulu Ndungane, Archbishop of Cape Town
17 June 2007 Westminster Abbey, London**

2 Sam 11:26-12:10,13-15

Ps 32:1-6,11-12

Gal 2:15-21

Luke 7:36-8:3

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I greet you in the precious name of our Lord. It is a great joy to be with you this morning.

Had King David lived today, there is no doubt that the popular press would have had a field day with his eventful life! Those who gave us the books of Samuel and Kings may not have had the same journalistic freedom as today's tabloids, but they still give us some pretty juicy material to work with! Our very first encounter with David tells us that he was ruddy. And if that was not enough, he had beautiful eyes. And, in case we had not yet got the message, we are also told he was handsome. The Brad Pitt of the Old Testament, perhaps! Or if not Brad Pitt, then David was certainly the sort of action hero we are used to seeing Brad Pitt play - as he despatches Goliath and any number of Philistines and other enemies.

Like any cool action hero, he also has his tender side - playing the harp and composing Psalms . And like rather too many celebrities, he has a torrid personal life. Saul's daughter Michal loves him, is lost to him, is returned to him, and ends up despising him. Then there is Abigail, the clever and witty wife of his enemy Nabal, who conveniently drops dead, so he can marry her. But when Bathsheba comes along, David has to engineer the dropping dead of her husband. Indeed, there are rather a lot of individuals who are inconvenient to David, who seem to drop dead one way or another. Often this happens by the hand of his trusty cousin and military commander Joab, who does the dirty deed before David even asks!

David is certainly a complex, if undeniably charismatic, character. Contrast him with his son and heir, Solomon: the ultimate wise and civilised ruler. Not for him the uncontrollable passions of his father. With careful judgement, Solomon reigns over peace and prosperity. He enters careful diplomatic marriages. No tumultuous tabloid love life for him.

But what do we find? For all his atrocious behaviour, it is David whom the Lord loves.

Solomon, the arch-pragmatist, allows his numerous foreign wives their own shrines to their own gods, and becomes caught up in their worship. 1 Kings 11 tells us that Solomon's 'heart was not devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been.' Whatever David's behaviour, his heart had remained true to the Lord.

This is of course the same Lord who had told his people repeatedly that he was a jealous God. So even though, as our Old Testament lesson told us, 'the thing that David had done displeased the Lord'; and even though David will have to deal with the consequences of his sins; nonetheless, what seems to have mattered most of all to this jealous God was that through it all, David loved him. It is absolutely vital that we do not lose sight of the central importance of this lesson, in all the differences within the Anglican Communion. The life of faith is first and foremost about our relationship with our God. It is not about how good our behaviour is. Nor does it hinge on how correct our theology is. Nor does it hinge on our stance on human sexuality. What God really cares about is whether we love him.

The first commandment is that we should love him, with all our heart and mind and soul and strength - that in the depths of our being we should yearn for him, and yearn to grow in love and knowledge of him, above all else. God loves us with an outrageous exuberance. He loves us far, far more than is reasonable or rational or sensible. He loves us to death - literally, to his own death, in Jesus on the cross. And the desire of this God, who is love, is that we should share in this overflowing, excessive and abundant love - with him, and with others. This is the message behind our gospel reading. Jesus tells Simon the Pharisee that the unrestrained love of the sinful woman is far more important to him than the religious respectability and the technically correct hair-splitting theology of his host.

Paul argues a similar point - it is by faith in Jesus Christ that we are justified. We are not saved by being orthodox in our theology, or good in our behaviour. What matters is whether Jesus is the touchstone at the heart of our lives. Our primary identity must be that of being 'crucified with Christ' so that 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.'

The first consequence of this is that by being united with him, we are automatically united to everyone else who is 'in Christ.' This is a gift of God, and it is a given. No matter how deep our divisions, we cannot change this fact. We would do well to remember this. The second consequence lies in remembering that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and he is the one who, by the Spirit, will continue to lead us into all Truth. Being led by him is what enables us to dare to tackle the difficult question of how to enunciate the eternal gospel truths in the changing circumstances of our world. In other words, being in Christ is what allows us to change our interpretation of Scripture.

I hope I have not shocked you by saying this! Please be reassured that I am NOT saying that 'anything goes' and we can make of Scripture whatever we like - or just ignore it where it suits us. But we have to be honest about this. There are areas of life where we have made great changes - not to Scripture itself, but to how we understand it. For example, it is entirely clear that slavery is accepted within the pages of the Bible. Even St Paul says 'Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. Where you a slave when you were called? Don't be concerned about it!'

It is wonderful that this year you have celebrated two centuries since the abolition of slavery. Tragically, today there are terrible new forms of slavery, and I am very honoured that the United Nations has invited me to host an international conference on tackling human trafficking later this year.

We have changed our position on lending money at interest - though I must say I am often rather less convinced that we were right!

We have changed our position on contraception. And we have changed our position on the role of women in the Church. Even where we disagree on this, we find ways to agree to disagree.

But we have NOT changed our position on Jesus, and I do not see that we could, and still call ourselves Christians. If anyone wants to pick a fight with me about my faith, let it be on the grounds of my relationship with Jesus, and my belief in who he is: the belief to which Scripture attests and the creeds affirm.

Jesus remains the eternal Word made flesh. Jesus remains the second person of the Trinity, pre-existent from before all time, taking on human form. Jesus remains fully God and fully human - the double homoousios to which the Nicene creed affirms. Jesus remains the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, who breaks the chains of death. No-one else can do this. Jesus remains the crucified one who was raised to new life. In twenty-first century scientific terms, we do not know how to describe his risen body - but we do know he was raised, and we do know he ascended, and we do know he sits at the Father's right hand, where he ever makes intercession for us.

Jesus Christ remains the same, yesterday, today and for ever! So, even though some of the church is in turmoil over issues of human sexuality, that should never become the touchstone of orthodox belief. Rather, let the heart of your faith be your love for God, responding to God's love in Christ for you. And if anyone asks you where you stand, be confident in saying with Paul, 'I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life that I live now in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.' Amen.