

## Sermon

George Best was **my** childhood hero but Lucinda said I couldn't choose him for this sermon. Apparently he doesn't appear anywhere in the Old Testament.

I still remember the glory days, George scoring six goals against Northampton Town in an FA Cup match, or scoring one of the goals that beat Benfica 4-1 in the European Cup Final. I remember the incredible skills, the ease with which he beat players and the amazing goals he scored. But I also remember the missed training sessions, his defiance of authority, his partying, womanising and drinking and his long fall from grace and sad death, all of which ultimately tainted my memory of him.

We want our heroes to be perfect but they can't be because they are human. King David is a classic example of an imperfect human hero. When we think of David we might think of him as shepherd, poet, giant-killer, a just King, a model of friendship and an ancestor of Jesus. He is mentioned around 600 times in the Old Testament and around 60 times in the New Testament. He appears on the first page of the New Testament and on the last page of the New Testament, surely one of the greatest characters in all of the Bible.

But alongside that list stands another: betrayer, liar, adulterer, murderer. The Bible makes no effort to hide David's failures. King David, perhaps more than any other person in the Biblical record, illustrates the wide moral range of human nature.

David was not a bad man who did some good things nor was he a good man who did some bad things. David was a real, honest to goodness human being who more often than not was a real mess. Just like George Best and just like us.

I chose the two readings for this service a few weeks ago, knowing that the subject was King David but not knowing what my angle was going to be nor how I was going to build the readings into a sermon. A bit like Ready Steady Cook with Ainsley Harriot, that TV show where chefs had to race the clock to make appetising recipes from mystery ingredients. My mystery ingredients were the first 13 verses from 1 Samuel:16 where David is anointed as King, and the first 10 verses from David's Psalm 139 about God's all-knowing, ever present nature. I struggled for a while to work out how I was going to build my sermon around these readings. I struggled and I prayed and I struggled and prayed some more and then I got it.

Let me explain to see if you can follow my line of thinking.

God chose David, via the prophet Samuel, even though God knew how imperfect David was and the sins he would later commit. At the time David loved and trusted God but could not have known himself quite how badly he would fail God, nor how many times God would have to forgive him.

In Psalm 139 we see David's awe-struck, prayerful realisation that God had chosen him, and accepted and loved him despite God knowing all the ways in which David would fail.

To put it another way at the beginning we have two parties, one of whom (God) knows the other (David) inside and out, backwards and forwards, in the past and in the future. It isn't until David writes his psalm that he appreciates how completely God had always known him, and how amazing that was.

## The Samuel reading

Let's look at the reading from Samuel in more detail. Quite by chance this sermon series has linked last week and this week. Hannah was last week's hero and, in Lucinda's sermon, we heard that Samuel was the son for whom Hannah had prayed so fervently. Here now is Samuel the prophet, tasked with finding and anointing the next king of Israel.

Of course in hindsight **we** know he will choose David but Samuel did not know. At God's command he went to Bethlehem, of all places, and was presented with seven of Jesse's sons one at a time. When he saw the first son Eliab he assumed that he would be the chosen one, presumably because he was such a strong and fine looking man, perhaps even reminding Samuel of King Saul. But God had other ideas and quietly squashes that assumption, telling Samuel,

***“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”***

Now, it's important to note that in these days seven was a valued number that signified perfection. So when Jesse had seven sons, that was something to be especially proud of in his society. We are not told the names of all the other sons but we are told that the youngest son, the eighth son was not even there. David was the youngest, and the smallest, the unexpected one, and no one really expected much from him. So when Samuel came to anoint the new king, they didn't even bother bringing David into the house. They just left him out in the field to watch the sheep.

Of course when someone eventually goes to fetch David and he is finally presented to Samuel, God tells him "Rise and anoint him, he is the one".

Samuel had some preconceptions based on outward appearances and many of us probably struggle with the same issue, I know that I do. It's something I am particularly guilty of and I feel ashamed when yet again my first judgement of someone is proved to be wrong.

This story from Samuel reminds us powerfully that God does not look at the outward appearance but at the heart. And David's heart was strong. This is the one who would defeat Goliath with just a slingshot. The one who would reign as king of Israel. The one who is even an ancestor of Jesus.

## **The Psalm**

And so we come to Psalm 139.

Let's consider some of the verses now, first those that talk about God's omniscience, his all-knowing nature. In the first few verses we hear 'Oh Lord, you have searched me and you know me, you know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down, you are familiar with all of my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord'

As humans, we naturally only show our good sides to people. We fall into the trap of wearing masks to conceal who we really are. We figure if people knew the real us, they would not like us or they would reject us. But God already knows everything about us and still he accepts and loves us. God is with us through every situation, in every trial - protecting, loving, guiding. He knows and loves us completely.

And then come the verses that talk about God's omnipresence, his presence everywhere. They begin 'Where can I go from your Spirit? and David asserts that God would be there if he were to go up to the heavens, or down to the depths. And in verse 9 we hear, 'If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast'. David must have taken so much reassurance from that and so do I. For Lesley and I those words have special significance for us right now. Our daughter will be settling on the far side of the sea when she emigrates to Canada on Wednesday. Our prayer of course is that God's hand will guide her and hold her fast'.

There is absolutely no place where men can go to escape the presence of God. He inhabits yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We should not be afraid of tomorrow because God is already there!

God is everywhere but perhaps there are some special places for you where he appears closest. Perhaps that **is** church but maybe also it is your home, or maybe you sense God's presence most clearly when you are with a particular person, or perhaps when outside walking in the countryside. For me it's out on the hills or the mountains - when the words of How Great thou art come easily to mind. 'when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur'.

## Messages for us

For me there are two key messages in this sermon:

- First - As Christians we should do our best not to judge someone on their outward appearance. Our God looks at the heart of people and we should try to see people as he does.
- Second - God knows us through and through. He sees what we hide from others, even those we are closest to. He knows the many ways in which we have failed and yet he accepts and loves us. Perhaps if we truly recognise that amazing truth then we can be kinder to ourselves and perhaps even more open and honest with those we love.

It's the second message that bowls me over. I am overwhelmed that God loves me because I know who I really am and what I really think and do! Why would God love me? I don't know! But I do know that HE DOES.

There is something else that I picked up in reading about David which is that he recognised the mistakes he made and honestly admitted them to his God. I read one commentary about David that very generously acknowledged that he didn't make the same mistake twice. Not something we could level at George Best and certainly not something I could claim for myself. The clear message however was that willingness to honestly admit our mistakes before God is the first step in dealing with them.

We can look at our own lives and say that, in us, as with George Best, and with David, God has a real mess on his hands. David's life shows us that this is not a problem for God, when we make the choice to be humble about who we are, to admit who we are and when we make the choice to rely, really rely on the grace and goodness of God to see us through.

Let us pray

Abba, Father we thank you for your love that surrounds us and supports us even when we are unaware. Help us to recognise we are your children and that you hold us in times of trauma, turmoil and tears and well as times of joy. Amen