

FAITH IN TIMES OF TROUBLE¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 23 June 2024

You will have noticed that today's readings all include accounts of people in trouble. In our Old Testament reading, Israel is in trouble with the Philistines, specifically in the person of the giant warrior, Goliath. In our reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul gives us to believe that he was always in trouble and the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles would support such a claim. In our gospel, the disciples find themselves in danger during a storm on the Sea of Galilee. How did they respond to the dangers confronting them and what might we learn from those responses?

The story of David and Goliath takes place in what is now known as the Iron Age, which began in the 1300s BC.² The Philistines had migrated to the Middle East when the Bronze Age collapsed and were well established before the nomadic Hebrews began to occupy the country.³ They were a confederation of five cities, Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron located in a coastal region almost exactly corresponding the present territory of Gaza. There is a strange resonance that today's conflict happens in the same location as today's reading. The Philistines probably originated in the Aegean, thus being of Greek origin. That this is an Iron Age conflict is shown in 1 Samuel 13:19-22, where the Philistines acted to prevent the Hebrews from gaining the skills to forge iron by themselves.

It can hardly come as a surprise that the Philistines resisted the arrival of the Hebrews. When, as we read several weeks ago, the Israelites asked Samuel to appoint a king, they were responding to the threats coming from the Philistines. One of Saul's tasks was to subdue them, in which task he failed, requiring a replacement leader. David was that replacement and this morning we have heard the third of his introductions. First, we found him as a shepherd, then as a musician at the court of King Saul⁴ and now as a warrior. Thus, David's credentials are established.

Saul was known as being head and shoulders above his fellows,⁵ one of the reasons why he was thought to be suitable king. Goliath was taller, over 297 cm, or about 6' 9". He terrified the Hebrews as he issued his challenge to battle. Neither Saul nor his soldiers are courageous enough to confront him. David arrives, not to fight, he is too young, but to bring supplies to his brothers in the army. Yet, he is the one to confront and slay the great challenger.

In essence, this story is about the ultimate failure of the "strong man" strategy of problem solving. What we need is a strong leader who can overcome problems. That this strategy fails is apparent on both sides of the conflict. Saul was chosen to be such a leader and Goliath trumped him simply by being larger. From Ukraine to Gaza and to America we see this approach playing out every day with disastrous results. As David comments in verse 47 of our

¹ Readings: 1 Samuel 17:32-79; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

² [Iron Age - Wikipedia](#)

³ [Philistines - Wikipedia](#)

⁴ 1 Samuel 16

⁵ 1 Samuel 10:23

reading, what happens will cause “all this assembly [to] know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear”. David’s apparent weakness is his strength.⁶

Before writing 2 Corinthians, Paul had been in Ephesus, where he wrote 1 Corinthians. He left there for Macedonia and was making his way south towards Corinth. Tom Wright suggests that his time in Ephesus was much harsher than shown in the account in Acts. We know that he had caused a serious riot there, one only just subdued by the civic officials.⁷ It was life threatening and Wright suggests, Paul had suffered close to a nervous breakdown.⁸ In this section of his letter, he pours out his heart to his readers. Since we read this text retrospectively, we are likely to regard Paul as a hero for everything that he had endured. Put that aside and think of an almost broken Paul revealing his inner thoughts. The Corinthians criticised him severely.⁹ In response, here is a man revealing his struggles and we ought not to dismiss them with a shallow “well done, Paul”.

In the middle of the passage, Paul suddenly switches to a list of his responses, patience, kindness, genuine love, probably the contrary of the responses of the Corinthians. If the first list of troubles reflects largely what those outside the church did to Paul, the second list, “imposters, and yet true”, reflects accusations made inside the church, and especially in Corinth.

As Tom Wright suggests, Paul’s revelation of his vulnerability is a mark of his authenticity.

Christians sometimes talk as if life were simply a matter of glory, of celebration, of the Lord providing all our needs and everything going forward without a hitch. Nobody actually lives like that all the time, of course, and the effort to go on believing it in the face of the evidence can produce a double life, with all the dangers of hypocrisy and shallowness. Equally, some people—including some Christians—react so forcibly to a grinning, shallow, falsely cheerful spirituality that they make out that everything is gloomy and filled with trouble, a constant round of difficulty and frustration. Christian maturity gets the balance right.¹⁰

That balance means accepting that both joy and sorrow go together.

Today’s gospel finds Jesus and his disciples in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. A storm arises; the disciples are afraid for their lives while Jesus calmly sleeps, apparently unaware of their, and his, plight. They wake him with accusations, and he stills the storm. As with all gospel stories, take care here. Nothing is as it seems.

As Tom Wright notes, the Jews were not seafarers, apart from this location as fishermen. The story of Jonah presents the sea as a foreign and dangerous place. In Psalm 107, “those who go down to the sea in ships” soon find themselves in trouble.¹¹ The sea represents evil and darkness, so Mark places the disciples in danger even before the storm arises.

Not only are they in danger when the storm does arise, they also find themselves separated from Jesus, who is asleep and apparently unconcerned.¹² This is a sudden change for them,

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Westminster Press 2012, pp. 126-134. Francesca Aran Murphy, *1 Samuel*, Brazos Press, 2010, pp.151-208

⁷ Acts 19-20

⁸ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians*, SPCK, 2003, pp. 3-4

⁹ 2 Corinthians 12:14-21

¹⁰ Wright, pp. 66-67

¹¹ Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001

¹² [In the Boat with Jesus - by Andrew McGowan \(substack.com\)](#)

because the immediately previous verse to our reading has them as the privileged intimates of one who explains all his parables to them in private.

As Andrew McGowan says:

... the calming of the storm is comparable to the ways Jesus has already shown divine power in confronting pain and spiritual oppression, and has shown his resolve in the face of corrupt political and religious power. All these for Mark constitute a whole, and so too [is] Jesus' confronting but necessary response to the disordered world (under the power of the "strong man" of last week's Gospel) which he has come to liberate ...

How do these three readings help us in time of trouble? They firstly disabuse us of any utopian view that suggests divine protection from trouble, as we ought to know from our reading of the Psalms, where complaints about hard times for good people are constant. We might also take this lesson from the story of Job. The world is such that there is no situation in which the desires and needs of everyone can equally be fulfilled. Conflict is a constant.

Next, we ought not to put our trust in so-called strong leaders. They are a delusion. "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help."¹³ Third, we should respond to trouble with "... patience, kindness, ... genuine love ...".

Finally, we need to place our trust in the one who confronts the storm and rebukes it, recognising that such trust does not mean an end to troubles but a confidence in the one who says, "Peace! Be still".

Free from anger and from pride,
Let us thus in thee abide;
All the depths of love express,
All the heights of holiness.

Love, all hatreds has destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void;
Colour, race, and factions fall:
Thou, O Christ, art all in all.¹⁴

¹³ Psalm 146:3

¹⁴ *New English Hymnal* 481



Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656)¹⁵,
David and Goliath.
Courtesy of Simon Gillespie Studio.



Detail of Paul on 5th-6th century fresco
Grotto of Paul and Thecla, Ephesus.



“Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee”
Jan Bruegel the Elder, 1596,
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

¹⁵ [Artemisia Gentileschi - Wikipedia](#)