

Pentecost 3 Year B, 21st June, 2009
1 Samuel 17: 32-49; Mark 4: 35-41

Violence and Power

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Introduction

Today's Scripture readings conjure up childhood images of giants and storms – forces of terror, of overwhelming magnitude. In our adult life these remind us of our powerlessness, vulnerability and dependency. Both stories present us with issues to do with power and the violence of life. What sort of power do we believe in, put our trust in, live our lives with? How do we use the power and authority we have?

The Story: Confronting Violence

The story I'm going to tell comes from my work in remote indigenous communities. It's a story of the little people, the Davids, with nothing much on their side but courage and faith that good could prevail over evil, against the Goliaths of violence born of overwhelming hopelessness. It is a story where the understanding of what power is, has begun to shift, to make way for new and different understandings of power. Not power as physical force and might, but power grounded in, and springing up from the strength of love and from hope, the vision that the future could be different. For some, and this aspect was more hidden than overt, their stories also tell of acting in Christian faith, being faithful to the God whom they believe can overcome all perils and adversity.

The town was in a remote rural location, showing all the marks of rural poverty and disadvantage. It's a town with bars on all the shop windows, with one of the highest rates of crimes of violence in Australia and with the highest rate of recorded teenage pregnancy in Australia. There's no hope of work, and there's endemic alcoholism. Payback is a common way of responding to wrongs committed. Within the indigenous communities there, the tribal elders and women's groups tell me that every woman and child has been exposed to some form of physical and sexual violence in their home.

Finding their children, some as young as 12 years old, prostituting themselves with the truckies along the highway, the women declared "enough is enough". Motivated by love for their children and by fear that these children will be themselves swallowed up by hopelessness, poverty, crime, abuse, or removed into the welfare system, – these women, showing enormous courage, began to combat the forces of evil. They began to access legal help to protect themselves and their children – and now manage community legal family violence programs; they have begun to take groups of young teenage girls out into the bush to educate them in tribal matters, to tell the stories that are their heritage and custom, to bring them back into touch with their proud aboriginal identity, and to educate them in hygiene, dress and self-care. The women have begun to take positions on local boards and community groups. They run community education programs, indigenous women's sexual conferences,

and their model of working has now spread to other communities. State and Federal Governments now fund these programs to the tune of more than a million dollars annually.

Most significantly, they've recognized that the violence and evil are not about bad people, but have much more complex causes. But they've nonetheless stood up to perpetrators of violence using both legal and customary means. They have rediscovered the power of community, the power of love, dignity and self respect.

And it's working. Within two years, medical and court statistics began to show a drop in violence-related crime and injury. There are still multiple problems; often one step forward, two steps back – you don't deal with deep-rooted problems in a few short years. But there's a new spirit in the community. And I believe that this is the power of God's spirit overturning the old entrenched power of physical force and violence. They mightn't name it as that, or dress it up in those Christian sorts of words, but we have an incarnational God, who entered into the depths and depravity of our world and is at work there with his love, whether acknowledged as such or not.

And do you know what the women did to celebrate? They organised a debutante ball. A real, proper Deb Ball. When they first told me of this desire, my ideological hackles rose with the colonial and paternalistic overtones, but this was their choice and their dream. This event was something that symbolized for this community a coming of age, a thing of beauty, something that captured into it all the pride they felt in what this community was becoming and which expressed their hope for the future. Fourteen young women, all wearing beautiful white dresses, hair done up, make up – the works. Some wearing shoes for the first time in their lives. Flowers brought in from the largest commercial centre some 300 kilometers away. Men in black tie, hired dinner suits. No men were allowed to be Deb partners if they were currently under any court orders or charges relating to violence. That ruled out quite a few- and didn't *they* feel shame! It was a great night.

Redefining Power

Some of us might be thinking “what has this story to do with my life?”

We live in a world populated by Goliaths and Sauls – people who hold incredible power and define that power in terms of weaponry, armies, economic might and political influence. Closer to home, violence and abuse happen all too frequently in nice neighbourhoods, in nice homes, even in nice churches, and is not only physical or sexual force; it covers a whole range of abuse of power and authority. There are goliaths of one sort or another that we all face in our lives.

At its heart, this is a story of possibility and hope; a story of turning things around, of conversion. It joins with the David and Goliath story in that the seemingly powerless stand up to the bullies against insurmountable odds; a combating of the opposing forces not by using like physical power or by returning violence with violence, but by going the way of God, finding ways that speak peace, healing and restoration. Ways that have taken courage and tenacity. The little ones of God, the vulnerable and marginalized, stand up to violence and begin the redefinition of what is acceptable

behaviour – not just taking on the oppressors, who are just as oppressed themselves, but combatting a culture of violence with Christ-given weapons of love, community and courage.

Tradition holds onto the story of David and Goliath as a story that is about God's faithfulness, God's presence, God's unique way of doing things: trust in God and all will be well. But it's also a story in which old notions of power as might, as physical force are subverted: David's actions demonstrate that God has means other than the traditional weapons of warfare by which to save his people.

But there is something of a twist. There's a problem with the story. The story's not without a reversion to the old ways of violence: there's a very gory decapitation at the end. David with his slingshot certainly challenges the cultural norms about power – showing that power is not located in force or by being bigger, better, stronger, as both Goliath and King Saul believe. Power belongs to God, and God will do things differently. Yet –and here's the twist, the problem - David still steps back into the framework of his culture and its old notions of power by force when he cuts off Goliath's head. Goliath is already dead (killed twice if you read the text closely); the decapitating is the step back or reverting into what humankind in the culture of that time applauded as a symbol of power. David is not completely free from seeking the trappings of power as we see again later in his life, nor is he free from the ways of violence. He's taken one enormous step into God's ways and away from the norm that power equals brute force, but he's got a way to go yet.

Conclusion: Jesus' Way of Peace

Where David's story is incomplete and imperfect, it takes Jesus to complete the picture. In our Gospel passage today, out on a treacherous sea, Jesus counters the violence of the storm with "Peace. Be still". Indeed, as the Gospel writer Mark is at pains to convey, Jesus counters evil in all its chaotic manifestations with the language of exorcism: "Peace". Jesus' whole life and death consistently upholds his way of peace; he consistently challenges the notion that power is found in physical strength and might. As we find in incidents with his disciples, he rebukes those who use violence, even where they think it's for good.

This story isn't just about God calling us into trust and faith; or about how he keeps on loving us despite our frailty and our fragile faith. Jesus may well still our fears and the forces that terrify us, and offer us grace and courage in the face of storms and giants, but that's not the whole thrust of these Scriptures today.

This God who sleeps through the storm on the sea shows us a new way of understanding power; he stakes his life on peace and self-giving, shows us how to love, and gives us his very spirit and his sort of power to be counter-cultural and redefine what power itself is.

The women in that remote indigenous community managed to step outside the forces of their culture to name and expose and confront the violence that had kept them in silence and fear for generations. Their understanding of power has begun its

monumental shift. It's not going to be easy for them to maintain this; there will be continual pressures to meet violence with violence, as history has often proved.

For them, and for us, the questions and challenges are stark and unequivocal: What sort of power do you place your trust in? Brute force, military might, economic strength, political influence, or the more seductive power traps of intellectual prowess, psychological knowledge, or even crystals or other gods and idols?

What power will you draw on to meet your Goliaths and the storms in your life?