

We triumph over the chaos of our lives through letting the self die

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Pentecost 5, 24th June 2018

Our first reading today is the wonderful story of the battle between David and Goliath, often used today in reference to an underdog defeating a more powerful enemy. Today's gospel story seems to match that story, with its similar focus upon the frightening power of overwhelming forces which render people helpless – the wind and waves which threaten to swamp the small boat carrying Jesus and his disciples. Like the Israelite soldiers who feared Goliath, Jesus' disciples fear the storm, and in both cases, help comes in an unexpected form.

Jesus, storm-conqueror and David, giant-slayer, seem like different versions of the same thing, but are they? In time, Jesus was heralded as one who would restore the kingdom of David, and in a way, that became so, but not as expected. From the perspective of the gospels, Jesus succeeded where David failed. The kingdom (kin-dom) Jesus brought about was the kingdom that David should have created.

Both the stories of David killing Goliath and Jesus calming the storm can be read as a 'victory for the little guy', or God exercising control over evil. It seems we are being shown that God's power is even greater than a storm, which stands for chaos. But in what way is that so? Does it mean that on a scale of power, the storm, or life's chaos, can rise to 10, but God can do 11? Not at all. Mark's Gospel certainly presents Jesus as overcoming all that undermines our humanity, but how? By being crucified. That is, he submits to evil, and allows it to destroy him. Now, transpose the crucified Jesus onto the man in the boat, with the disciples threatened by wind and waves, and you see the 'weapon' against the forces which threaten, is One whose love is utterly vulnerable.

Let's jump back to the fight between David and Goliath, as that story will shed a bit more light on the nature of Jesus' victory over evil, by showing us what it is not. As we hear about David, we get a picture of one who is short, inexperienced in battle, but heavily trusting in God. A shepherd – not one you would normally put forward to take on a giant.

Now, notice that in the story, David never consults God about taking on Goliath, nor do we ever hear of God instructing David give up sheep-minding and go and fight Goliath. Yes we hear David sprouting great confidence in God – that God will grant him victory over Goliath, just as God granted him victory over lions and bears when he guarded the sheep, not to mention the time God saved him from that falling branch by placing a gold coin on the ground for him to duck down to pick up, or the time God prevented him from being run over by a drunk chariot driver by causing a wheel to fall off the chariot. David may be a lowly shepherd, but he is a master of exaggerating, in order to gain advantage. He knows what that will be, because twice he is told that whoever kills Goliath will be granted the king's daughter in marriage and a tax-free life. David's vision is not of God's protection. It's of the chink in Goliath's armour. He knows how to beat him – hurl a stone into the right spot, where Goliath is vulnerable. David is very cunning: a humble cheese-deliverer, but highly ambitious. He wants to be king, which is what killing Goliath will make him. King Saul is a failure. He's meant to be Israel's champion, fighting for his people, but he is afraid, so David steps into the power vacuum. Sure in the knowledge that God has chosen him to replace Saul as king, he now ambitiously, takes control of the process, so it will play out, *his way, in his time*. Here David is not God's servant, rather, by claiming God's protection, David makes God into *his servant*. Of course though, David isn't the first to use God, or some other authority to justify using violence to fight violence.

We are easily drawn into David's way of using violence to overcome evil. Although not preferred, isn't it the only way? The crucified Jesus suggests not. Jesus reveals that in seeing our enemies as separate and against us, we become like them, cooperating with the world-view and way of living which has us pursuing what others have, becoming their rivals, and competing against them. The story of David and Goliath illustrates the truth in that. Right from the start, the fact that David is being run by rivalry is seen in the way he mimics the curse Goliath throws at him, promising to give his flesh to the birds of the air and the animals of the earth, which in those days was the worst thing you could wish for a person. David ups the ante by promising to feed Goliath's *entire army* to the birds of the air and the animals of the earth. David is already becoming like Goliath. Then upon killing Goliath, David takes possession of Goliath's armour and sword. Now he has taken up arms for good. Following his victory over Goliath, king Saul becomes jealous and threatened by David's popularity and tries to kill him. Eventually David joins his previous enemy, going to live in Gath, Goliath's home town. Again mimicking Goliath, he has become *David of Gath*. He fights battles for the Philistines, eventually rising to become the king's personal bodyguard, but when the Philistines prepare for battle with the people of Israel, their commanders don't trust David, so he returns to Israel, spends years avoiding being killed by king Saul, and later becomes king himself. During that time and even before it, David fights numerous battles, slaughtering many people. Towards the end of his reign as king, David offers to build a temple for God, but God declines his offer on the grounds that he has 'shed much blood and waged great wars'. David the cheese-delivering shepherd, has become David the warrior, a man driven by rivalry and violence. He has become what his enemy was.

The story of David tells us that if we take up verbal and physical violence to fight violence, we only become more violent. We may believe that we are choosing a means to fight against something bad, but it's more a case of us being run by something else. We think we are in control, but we are being possessed by what is running us.

There are signs that indicate this has occurred to us, which include: Being absolutely convinced of someone's guilt; Believing that the other person's version of things is filled with lies and distortions; Celebrating wounding, 'killing off', or killing another; and that If someone did to you what you are justifying in the name of goodness, you would see their actions as undeniable proof of their wickedness. (<https://www.ravenfoundation.org/scapegoating/>)

I was surprised to read one of my favourite theologians describing Jesus as being like evil. Then I realised he didn't mean evil in the sense of being bad, but being like Evel Knievel, the motor-bike stuntman. Despite holding the record for breaking more bones in his body than any other person, Evel Knievel was excellent at teaching people to jump over obstacles on motorbikes. If he just told them they could do it, it's unlikely they would have had the courage to try, but by doing it himself, they could see they could do it too. This is just what Jesus did. He did not fight violence with violence, but even allowed violence to kill him, and then came back as a living dead person, showing that death couldn't take away what he essentially was. By that he meant death of the self, i.e., the self that is independent (as David was), the self which aims at individuality above all else, the self which promotes and protects itself at all costs, the self that is run by rivalry. We are given the power to imitate Jesus, to resist being run by rivalry, and allow our 'selfish self' to die, thus we shall not be overcome by others' violence, or the 'storms' of life. We must let that power run us, not starting with the hardest challenges, but starting with small things - enemies we encounter in daily life, such as politicians we might hate, selfish drivers, inconsiderate people and circumstances where everything doesn't go our way.