

ON THE ABUSE OF POWER¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, 1 August 2021

This morning's reading from 2 Samuel brings us into what will ultimately be the destruction of the family of King David. Had last Sunday not been our celebration of our patron, St James, we would have heard the beginning of this story, the end of which we have just read. It is well known. King David lives next door to the home of one of his senior military officers, Uriah the Hittite. It is spring, described in 2 Samuel as "the time when kings go out to battle", that is, after the end of winter with its unsuitable weather. If you had watched closely the military actions in Afghanistan, you would have heard them talk about "the fighting season", which runs from April to October. David's troops were besieging the city of Rabbah under the control of his general, Joab. Rabbah is modern Amman, the capital of Jordan, and about 72 km east of Jerusalem as the crow flies. Uriah was on active duty with the army but David had remained in Jerusalem.

Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, is "very beautiful". Taking the air on the flat roof of his house, David sees Bathsheba bathing. Actually, she was having a ritual bath, a *mikveh*,² mandatory for a Jewish women seven days after the end of her period to restore her ritual purity. Having discovered who she was, David sent for her and had intercourse with her. Given that David was the king and that Bathsheba had been sent for, an invitation she couldn't refuse, this event was, by any definition, rape.³ As a result, Bathsheba becomes pregnant.

The story exposes the critical timing of these events. Uriah was on active service many kilometres away. He had left well before the start of Bathsheba's period. He simply could not be the father of her child. David devises a plan to make it appear that Uriah was the father. He sent for him, possibly on the pretext of receiving a report and giving Joab some orders, and, when he comes, David suggests that he spend the night with his wife. The text says that David suggested that Uriah go home and "wash his feet", a euphemism for sexual intercourse. This is where ritual purity appears again. The text tells us that the Ark of the Covenant was with the army, requiring the soldiers to remain ritually pure, which Uriah would not be if he slept with his wife. So, he indignantly declines. David proceeds to get Uriah drunk in the hope that will weaken Uriah's resolve, but it does not.

David now faces the birth of the child and the impossibility of Uriah being the father. He proposes to cover one crime with another and devises a plan to have Uriah killed. He instructs Joab to place him in the front line of the battle and suddenly withdraw, leaving Uriah exposed. This order was conveyed in a letter that, for anyone not knowing its contents, justified Uriah's original recall. Joab does as he was commanded and Uriah is killed in what is effectively a murder. When David is told of this by Joab's messenger, he shrugs his shoulders saying, "the sword devours now one and now another". And this is where we began to read this morning. With Uriah out of the way, Bathsheba carries out the required mourning and then David marries her.

David's attempt to cover up his wrongdoing fails. Nathan the prophet confronts David with a parable about a man who steals his poor neighbour's lamb to provide a meal for his guests.

¹ Readings: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-12; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

² [Mikveh - Wikipedia](#)

³ [145462.pdf \(baylor.edu\)](#)

David is horrified and, when confronted by Nathan, confesses his sins. The heading on our Psalm today, Psalm 51, mentions both Bathsheba and Nathan and says that it was composed by David on this occasion. Scholars suggest, however, that it was most probably written after the exile in Babylon and attributed to David.

I have recounted this story in some detail because I wanted to expose the layers of deceit and wrongdoing that it involves. One of the great virtues of the Bible is that it exposes us to ourselves. The compilers of 2 Samuel deserve substantial credit for not disguising any of the details of this powerful man's disgraceful behaviour. I want to talk to you about the abuse of power.

We might start with the story that Nathan told. It is not a clear parallel with David's crimes. In a subtle way, Nathan is seeking to make an unsuspecting David angry at the wrongs of another person. A too direct approach would probably have brought on David's defensiveness and then anger directed towards Nathan himself. Nevertheless, the story does characterise how David's crimes are viewed. The principal sin in the story is the theft of the ewe lamb from its owner. The implication is that all David's crimes are against Uriah the Hittite. His property in his wife was stolen from him, followed by his life. Nathan confirms this when he outlines what David has done.

David has clearly abused his power over Uriah. His abuse of Bathsheba is not recognised. We have all become aware over the last few years how entrenched this pattern is. Events in our Commonwealth Parliament House bear an uncanny similarity to this morning's reading. The abuse of power might not always be acknowledged but it is clearly prevalent in most parts of our society, including the church.

We are not lacking in evidence. In April this year, our General Synod released a report that it had commissioned into family violence in the Anglican Church of Australia.⁴ The prevalence of such violence was the same or higher in the Anglican Church as in the general community. Church attendance did not reduce the prevalence among Anglicans. More women reported it than men and most Anglican victims of intimate violence did not approach the church for help. The report said that, although that was not the intention, some Christian teachings contributed to the incidence of domestic violence. It said:

Absolutist discourses related to marriage as a lifelong commitment, the submission of the wife to the husband, unconditional forgiveness, and suffering for Christ—whether they are taught by church leaders, internalised by victim-survivors, or co-opted by abusers in this way—are harmful for those who experience abuse. ... Conversely, discourses such as marriage as a covenant, the equality of partners in a marriage, and God's mercy and love can help to empower victim-survivors to extricate themselves from abusive relationships.

A report of the World Council of Churches in 2004, "Interrogating and Redefining Power" commented:

There is a tendency among some to overestimate the church, assuming that the church is an embodiment of peace and the world is all full of violence and injustice. The church is a sphere

⁴ Powell, R. & Pepper, M. (2021). National Anglican Family Violence Research Report: Top Line Results. NCLS Research Report. NCLS Research. [NAFVP-Top-Line-Results-Report-NCLS-Research.pdf](https://www.anglican.org.au/NAFVP-Top-Line-Results-Report-NCLS-Research.pdf) ([anglican.org.au](https://www.anglican.org.au))

of peace in terms of its calling rather than in terms of actual achievement. We need to desist from making triumphalistic claims.⁵

Power is a necessary feature of all communities. Without it we could not keep the peace or manage our affairs. Power comes in many forms and we should not think about it only on the large scale. It exists in our most ordinary relationships. We must not imagine that abuse of power comes only from giants like David. It can and does exist everywhere. Indeed, the creation myth, with its story of people seeking to be like God and to assume God's power, suggests that abuse of power may be close to the heart of human brokenness.

To a certain extent, this sermon is a waste of time. I say that because the impact of a sermon falls on our minds and, if well done, on our emotions. We deceive ourselves, however, if we think that to change behaviour, we must first change minds. Experience in workplaces and elsewhere tells us the opposite. If we change people's behaviour, their minds will follow. If we wish to reduce abusive behaviour in the workplace, we do not first try to educate people that it is wrong. We first tell them that certain behaviours are not to be done.⁶ Changed behaviour leads to changed thoughts. For this reason, church communities must be alert to identify unacceptable behaviour and address it.

Nevertheless, our reading from Ephesians presents us with some suggestions about a way out of a problem that will always be with us. This reading has some similarities with Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 12 about the way in which the parts of the body work together for the good of the whole. In Ephesians, Paul identifies the different gifts that are given to different people. Each of these gifts, we might note, brings with it a degree of power that is open to being abused. In both books, Paul says that the proper use of gifts, abilities and powers is for building up the body of Christ.

Brother Curtis Almquist of the Society of St John the Evangelist in Cambridge MA comments that:

Christianity without power is like a country club for nice manners and good taste. Christianity is about engaging the powers and facing the needs of this world with the power and provision of God.

His colleague, Geoffrey Tristram, expands that thought:

If we are trying to follow Jesus Christ, our challenge is to use the power that we have been given to build up community and not break it down ...⁷

If that is so in the church, it is so in the world at large.

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 94:

They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow:
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces

⁵ [Interrogating and Redefining Power - A theological consultation | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)

⁶ [The Bamboo Project: Change Your Behavior, Change Your Mind \(michelemmartin.com\)](#)

⁷ Brother Curtis Almquist SSJE and Brother Geoffrey Tristram SSJE, *Cowley Magazine*, Summer Edition 2021, [2021_Summer_Cowley_web2.pdf \(ssje.org\)](#)

And husband nature's riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others but stewards of their excellence.
The summer's flower is to the summer sweet
Though to itself it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.⁸



Carlo Maratta 1625-1713

Bathsheba at the Bath

In a private collection

This painting presents an erroneous view of Bathsheba as a seductress, admiring her own image and inviting David's gaze. It is typical of how the story has been treated over the centuries. It also overlooks the ritual purpose of her bath.

⁸ William Shakespeare, Sonnet 94 [Sonnet 94: They that have power to hurt and will... | Poetry Foundation](#)