

**Sermon: How the mighty have fallen**  
**Silvia Purdie, Cashmere, Sunday 1 July**

Bible Readings:

2 Samuel 1:1-4, 17-21

Mark 5:21-23, 35-43

Last week's sermon was a bit challenging, getting you talking and about hard questions. So today you can just relax and not stress, fall asleep if you want to. You will be pleased to know that I have a neatly structured sermon for you today, with three points.

First, a point about the Bible

second, a point about grief

and third, a point about Jesus

First, a point about Biblical authorship

Through my series on the books of Samuel has been an argument running through it in which I am claiming that these books are based on eye witness testimony. I have talked about how the Jewish people, by the time of Samuel, had developed their own written Hebrew script. I have suggested that events were recorded in writing not long after they occurred.

I am suggesting that this time in Israel's life, of a central monarchy, was monumentous in Israel's history, not just for battles won, not just for the booty gained by those battles, but for Israel finding its voice, recording its history, singing its songs. The royal court grew the beginnings of a library, which in time became the Old Testament.

People constantly under threat don't have the luxury of time or energy for writing things down. We modern readers struggle with all the gory battles described in the Old Testament. But the winning of victories against other tribes was essential for achieving for Israel some space to breathe, some degree of stability. And in this time of relative safety, great works were written down, of God-in-history, of God-in-song.

Our reading today gives us a curious glimpse into the importance of written text. When David mourns privately and publically for Saul and Jonathan he does two things, as recorded in verses 17 & 18. He composes a new song of lament. And he remembers an old song, which was written in an old scroll, called the Book of Jashar, which has been lost but one verse of the song is found in Joshua chapter 10.

So here is my point, about the Bible. It is layer upon layer of God revelation in human experience. David read old texts and he wrote new ones.

I truly believe it is like that for us. We read these ancient texts and we add our own record of faith. We learn old songs and we write our own songs, we tell our own stories. We are part of a book of faith stretching back 4 millenia and stretching forward into our own millenia.

On to my second point. About grief. Our reading today includes the words of a song of lament, by David for Saul and Jonathan. The chorus of the song is that line that rings familiar to us: *How the mighty have fallen*. How the mighty have fallen. It is an outpouring of grief. It is deeply personal and also public. It is gut-wrenching.

Chris and I have been reading about grief this year. He is working towards a Masters thesis, about how funerals are done in the army. The army is pretty good at wrap-around support after a death, and the chaplains play a key role. He can tell you all about it when he's done his research. One theme that comes through in the literature about grief is how very difficult it is for us human beings to come to terms with the reality of a death. Our minds and guts react with disbelief, shock. Our hearts reel with a profound and ongoing sense of wrongness, especially when death is unexpected. The task of grief is the challenge of living in a world which is disconnected, torn, dislocated. This we call mourning. Each of us knows what it feels like. Whether from a death of someone we loved, or from the destruction of a home, or finishing a career, or the loss of a pet. I remember after we moved from Dunedin to Palmerston North for months getting occasionally knocked by a strong emotional pain, from losing the close community and friendships that surrounded us in our Dunedin years.

We all carry grief. We all have jarred edges where loss has torn at us.

A song of lament is a good way to grieve.

David cries out his pain and sings his way into facing the reality of loss.

How the mighty have fallen.

When we are in the midst of grief we find ourselves at odds with the normal world that flows on around us.

In a moment Chris is going to read a famous lament poem in a moment, by WH Auden.

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,*

This is very similar to the poem that David teaches to his people, the verse we have in Joshua 10 (verse 12) from the Book of Jashar

*"Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and Moon, stop in the valley of Aijalon."*

So what is my point about grief? That loss forces us into a place where we feel disconnected from ordinary life, where we feel that the sun should stand still, where we want everyone to stop what they are doing and just mourn with us ... but life goes on and the wrongness eases. Grief is a basic human experience that we share with people in every age and every culture. In our society we are afraid to look death in the face, and too little acknowledge the grief of those who grieve. Faith does not take away pain, but it does make us stronger, more able to face and name our sadness because we know that God is greater, death has been overcome, and that we are accompanied as we grieve.

So, finally, a third point. A brief third point. About Jesus.

In our Gospel story today Jesus interrupts the grief of the community for the 12-year-old girl. Stop your wailing! She is not dead at all, just sleeping! As Jesus stepped into that house he announced himself as Lord of life and of death. For Jesus, death was not an impermeable barrier, not a threat, not an enemy. Jesus and Jesus alone crossed the line between life and death and back again. He reached across and brought the girl back with him into the land of the living, and brought her family from devastating loss to utter joy.

It's a curious detail that Mark records the Aramaic words that Jesus spoke – *Talitha cum* – and then translates them into Greek “Up you get, girl”. Obviously, as Peter and the others told and retold this story, the actual words of Jesus echoed in their heads and were always part of the story. Just 2 words: ‘Talitha cum’. It is a gift to us, to hear Jesus’ simple power and authority flowing down through the centuries. I hope that one day when death comes close and my time has come, I hope that in that moment I will hear these words and feel Jesus take me by the hand and lift me up. For he is my Lord, in life, in death, in life beyond death.

### **Funeral Blues**

*W H Auden*

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead'.  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

## 2 Samuel 1 (New Revised Standard Version)

**1** After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. **2** On the third day, a man came from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. When he came to David, he fell to the ground and did obeisance. **3** David said to him, "Where have you come from?" He said to him, "I have escaped from the camp of Israel." **4** David said to him, "How did things go? Tell me!" He answered, "The army fled from the battle, but also many of the army fell and died; and Saul and his son Jonathan also died."

### 2 Samuel 1:17-27

**17** David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. **18**

(He ordered that The Song of the Bow<sup>[a]</sup> be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said:

**19** Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places!

**How the mighty have fallen!**

**20** Tell it not in Gath,

proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon;

or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice,

the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

**21** You mountains of Gilboa,

let there be no dew or rain upon you,

nor bounteous fields!<sup>[b]</sup>

For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,

the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.

**22** From the blood of the slain,

from the fat of the mighty,

the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,

nor the sword of Saul return empty.

**23** Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!

In life and in death they were not divided;

they were swifter than eagles,

they were stronger than lions.

**24** O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,

who clothed you with crimson, in luxury,

who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

**25** **How the mighty have fallen**

in the midst of the battle!

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.

**26** I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;

greatly beloved were you to me;  
your love to me was wonderful,  
passing the love of women.  
<sup>27</sup> **How the mighty have fallen,**  
and the weapons of war perished!