

## **The Swiss Church in London, 7 April 2019**

### **David and Goliath, by Reverend Carla Maurer**

#### **Reading 1 Samuel 17:41-53**

Goliath with his shield bearer in front of him kept coming closer to David. He looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy. "Come here," he said, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!"

David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

As Goliath moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground. So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone. He took hold of the Philistine's sword and drew it from the sheath. After he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword. When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they turned and ran. Then the men of Israel and Judah pursued the Philistines to the entrance of Gath and to the gates of Ekron. Their dead were strewn along the road. When the Israelites returned from chasing the Philistines, they plundered their camp.

#### **Sermon**

##### *The Davids and Goliaths of our times*

Most of you will have been grocery shopping in the past weeks. Where did you go? Did you choose to fill your shopping basket at Tesco's, Iceland or Sainbury's, or did you opt for the local family run cornershop?

Most of us have a mobile phone, probably a smartphone from one of the big market brands. Our phones are made from materials that are mined under extremely dangerous conditions in countries like Congo, often by children who risk their lives for this – for our mobile phones. There is a company, Fairphone, that aims to create fair conditions. Yet only few people buy a fairphone because it's much cheaper to buy a phone from a big brand.

Small family run businesses and ethically and socially fair products are fighting uphill battles against giant supermarket chains and mass production. Small businesses are under immense pressure and fight to survive. People in other parts of the world have to suffer for our cheap products. The modern world is full of David and Goliath stories, the battle of the weak small Shephard's boy against the strong ruthless warrior.

### *Identifying with David*

The story of David and Goliath is a crowd pleaser. Historically it represents the victory of the vulnerable Israelites over the regional superpower. Ancient Israel was a small kingdom constantly surrounded by big superpowers that were threatening their existence. The kingdoms of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persia dominated the Middle and Far East over thousands of years and small independent kingdoms such as Israel were under constant threat.

But this is probably not the main reason why the story of David versus Goliath is so popular. The world of Ancient Israel has little to do with our lives today. The story appeals to us because it is easy to identify with the lead characters of the story, more precisely with David. We see ourselves in David, our weaknesses, our vulnerability. If little David can defeat the powerful Goliath then perhaps we can overcome the obstacles in our lives too.

David, the good guy, Goliath, the bad guy: it is a superhero story, and as in all superhero stories we tend to identify with the underdog. We are on David's side. But is life really this simple?

If you ask me here and now what I'd rather support, the cornershop or the big supermarket chain, the big brand mobile phone or the fairphone, I would of course say the cornershop and the fairphone. And yet, I do my shopping mainly in a big supermarket chain, and I have in my pocket an apple product.

So who am I now: David or Goliath?

Who am I to the children who mine the materials for my phone?

Who am I to the families whose businesses are at risk when I walk into a supermarket chain to do my shopping?

Human existence is complex and so is being a disciple of Christ. Being a Christian is not a wellness programme. It is challenging, controversial and it brings us in touch with all sides of our human existence, good and bad and everything in between. We are David and we are Goliath. We are the victims and we are the perpetrators. We are the weak and we are the powerful. We are both and all of these at the same time.

### *Introducing Karl Barth*

Someone who has thought a lot about the complexity of Christian discipleship was Karl Barth, not only the most famous Swiss theologian of all times but many say the most important theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Karl Barth was born in 1886 and was a Minister in the canton of Aargau. He lived through the horrors of both world wars and saw the world in shatters. Most crucially he observed how the majority of churches either preached political mainstream opinions or simply remained silent in the face of the horrors to avoid scrutiny by the government or their congregations. On the backdrop of the First World War, Karl Barth developed a radically new and yet traditional theology, and during the Second World War he became part of a church group that opposed National Socialism calling on churches to refuse to collaborate with the Nazis.

Karl Barth criticised his fellow Ministers for preaching what people wanted to hear rather than to take their lead from the Bible. It is indeed easy to fall into the trap of one's sermons being led by contemporary political opinions and newspaper headlines. Recently a journalist asked me whether Brexit was a topic of my sermons. Not explicitly, I answered, yet perhaps in some ways it is.

The biblical message stands at the centre of radical contemporary theology. Church and theology do not have to reinvent themselves in times of political turmoil. God's word alone is radical enough, critical enough, enlightening enough no matter what times we live in. Or

in other words: the word of God will always critically mirror the topics of our times without explicitly talking about them.

*God says yes to us*

But what is this radical timeless biblical truth that withstands contemporary trends and opinions across times and continents?

It is this: God says yes to us – to all of us, to all of humankind.

God made an everlasting covenant with us (we remember: the rainbow he set in the clouds after the big flood). God's yes is eternal and embraces everyone. God's yes never goes away. Even if we turn our back on God, even if the world stops believing in God, God will never ever stop believing us. Through Jesus Christ God has entered a tangible relationship with us. The complex, painful, joyful, inexplicable nature of being human is part of our story with God.

This is the radical nature of Christian faith, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Whatever we say and believe, whatever we preach, decide or do, however messy, unpredictable, faulty and sinful life is, God's yes to humankind – all of humankind – cannot be undone by political or religious trends.

God's yes to us is radical. It is radical because it is the foundation of our dignity that no one can take away from us, whatever the circumstances. Any political decision or trend that undermines human dignity is a move away from God. Any contemporary event or trend that increases inequality, poverty and hatred undermines God's yes to us. In the name of God it is our calling to work towards a world in which everyone's dignity is respected.

*We are Goliath*

What lesson can we draw from this for our reading of David and Goliath?

Our first intuition is to identify with the weaker opponent in this battle, David. David mirrors our own powerlessness and weakness in the eye of an often threatening world.

Yet when God made his covenant with Noah and his wife and their sons and daughters he included in this covenant all their descendants, and as they were the only survivors of the deadly flood this meant: all of humanity. Last time we heard the story of the tower of Babel which tells us how Noah's descendants were scattered all over the earth speaking different languages. Humanity became increasingly diverse and people went their own paths. Sarah and Abraham had a son, Isaac, the forefather of Judaism and Abraham also had a son with their maid Hagar, Ismael, the forefather of Islam. The different tribes began to speak different languages, develop different cultures and worship different Gods. They eventually started to turn against each other. Despite of God's close relationship with the Israelites, his chosen people, God's yes embraces all of humankind, all of Noah's descendants.

David and Goliath are both children of God. David and Goliath are both part of us.

David isn't just the handsome small Shephard's boy, and Goliath isn't just a brute. After David's miraculous defeat over Goliath, David cut off Goliath's head and took the loot to Jerusalem. The Israelites followed the fleeing Philistines and killed them and plundered their camps. This is not a very graceful behaviour for a winner who just days before found themselves in the position of the weak. It sounds more like a merciless act of revenge.

It doesn't take much for David to turn into Goliath, and for Goliath to turn into David. Our weakness can turn into strength in the blink of an eye. Our strength can be our downfall and lead us to weakness. Depending on the situation we are sometimes David and sometimes we are Goliath, and often it is not even clear who we are.

### *Life is unpredictable*

There is no clear line between good and bad, weak and strong. Life is complicated, unpredictable, messy and uncomfortable. We are sinners and saints. We are David and Goliath. We come to church in the search for answers – answers that we may or may not get. There is not even a guarantee that we find God in church.

We often say that God can move mountains. But sometimes God also puts mountains straight in front of us. God is in both the mountain removed and the mountain put in front of us.

We can't narrow down God, not with words, nor with images or actions. It is God who finds us, not us who find God.

In all this confusion and unpredictability God says yes to us, of that we can be sure. God came to find us in Jesus Christ, to walk with us, to reach out to those most in need, a visible and tangible sign of God's promise, radical and steadfast, to suffer and to laugh, to be born and to die and to come back to life again.

Today we are not going to leave the church with the good feeling that we are like David. Today we are going to leave the church knowing that we are both David and Goliath. If we truly understand that we are both, David and Goliath, and that God's yes includes everyone, then and only then can we build the kingdom of God together, a kingdom that becomes a nourishing environment for everyone.

Amen