

Betrayal, Murder and Miracles

2 Samuel 11:1-15

John 6:1-21

26th July 2015

Whoever said the Bible was boring. Our readings this morning read almost like a good thriller!

David, probably the star of the Old Testament and certainly a very important character in the development of the Hebrew nation, is found to be not quite such a nice guy. We have heard over the last few weeks many of the good things that David did, how he became a wise King, loved by his people. A King who had united the children of Israel into a nation, something that was not to last much beyond his son Solomon. A mighty warrior who took on Goliath, the mighty Philistine, twice his size and fully armoured. But David uses a sling to slay him and then chops off his head.

David, the second King of Judah, has replaced Saul and is well on the way to making Judah a key Kingdom in what we now call the Middle East, straggling the main route between Egypt in the South and Assyria to the north. David had married Michal, Saul's daughter, when Saul was still king, and then Ahinoam and Abigail. But David was not satisfied.

When he saw Bathsheba he wanted her but she was already married to Uriah one of David's generals. And the only way David could have Bathsheba was if Uriah died. So David manipulated his army so that Uriah was in the front line and was killed, whilst he, David, was back in the safety of Jerusalem.

Unlike most of the other kings of his era David was not all powerful and a prophet Nathan confronted David about the death of Uriah by means of a parable about a rich man and a poor man and a lamb. The lamb was very precious to the poor man and his family but when a visitor arrived in the rich man's house and the rich man needed to show hospitality he did not kill one of his own lambs but misused his position and power to take the precious lamb from the poor man. David expressed his outrage to Nathan that the rich man should be so callous. Nathan then told David that he was the rich man as far as Uriah was concerned.

There are many lessons about power, corruptions, betrayal etc that have been drawn from this passage but I would like to focus on the lamb. The lamb that was precious to the poor man. There are some interesting parallels with Jesus as the Lamb of God. The poor were precious to Jesus and the poor were Jesus main supporters. It was the rich and powerful of Jesus day that put him to death.

In the passage about the feeding of the five thousand we can see Jesus concern for the masses. Jesus had gone with his disciples to a remote place in the mountains to prepare for the Jewish Pass Over – the greatest festival in the Jewish calendar. But such was Jesus fame a great crowd followed them for they wanted to hear more from this great teacher and to see if he would performed any miracles. The rest of the story is so well known I will not repeat it here.

Barclay suggests three possible explanations about what happened:

- The bread and the fishes where miraculously multiplied. A possibility but it would appear to go against what Jesus did in the desert when tempted by the devil to turn stones into bread.

- It was a sacramental meal with everyone having just a tiny bit.
- Many of the crowd had food with them but didn't want to share their food with those who had none until Jesus started to share the loaves and fishes then the crowd shared.

As Barclay says *"It may be that this story represents the biggest miracle of all – a miracle which changed human nature and altered not loaves and fishes but men and women."*

In many ways I like Barclay's third possibility as it is a strong and clear example for us today.

The next part of our reading from John is interesting, after the crowd had seen the miracle of the transformation of the loaves and fishes, or the hearts of the people, they started to call him a Prophet who had come into the world. Jesus was afraid that the crowd would go on to declare him "King".

Remember the Jewish people for centuries had wanted to have a King at their head and Rome had got rid of their last King and appointed a Governor. Also it is likely that many in the crowd would have been aware of Jesus genealogy and his relationship to King David. To avoid this development Jesus goes up into the mountains to be alone leaving the disciples to encourage the crowd to go home.

As some of you will have noticed I occasionally seek help from William Barclay's commentaries on the New Testament. Barclay was a Presbyterian theologian born in 1907 and died in 1978. He spent some 30 years as, initially Lecturer in New Testament Language and Literature and, then as a Professor at the University of Glasgow. His

Daily Bible Study covers the whole of the New Testament in 17 volumes.

One of the things I have always liked about Barclay's commentaries is how he puts the biblical verses into context, the historical, social, geographical, political and theological context. Before studying Divinity at University he studied Classics so his knowledge of the world of Jesus and the writers of the New Testament lived, taught and wrote in was extensive.

When I read Barclay's comments on verses 16-21 I began to understand the underlying meaning of what at first sight seems an amazing miracle, is much more. It is a window on the relationship between Jesus and his disciples and ultimately between Jesus and all his followers.

The writer of this gospel is John, a fisherman, and it is important to remember that John writes about this simple incident as a fisherman.

After the crowds attempt to make Jesus a King, Jesus goes away by himself. By now the disciples had become used to Jesus seeking solitude so they did not worry. As the hours passed and the sun began to set the disciples realised that it was Jesus intention is to walk round the lake to the other side to Capernaum which may have been their home base at that time. The alternative to walking round the head of the lake was to sail or row across, a distance of maybe 6 or 7 kilometres.

The disciples set out in their fishing boat but as they approached the other coast the wind started to blow. No unusual as the Sea of Galilee is surrounded by hills and mountains. It was almost dark and the disciples became afraid although most of them would have experienced the vagaries of the weather on the Lake as they were fisherman.

We know from earlier in the chapter that it was almost Passover which meant that the moon would be almost full. So although the sun had set it would not have been dark as the moon would be bright. The disciples then saw Jesus “walking on the water” as our translation tells us today. And Jesus comforts them “do not be afraid” he says as he will say again after his resurrection when he appears in the locked upper room.

This is where Barclay gets very interesting. The actual NT Greek translated as “on the water” is “epi tēs thalassēs”. Exactly the same Greek words are used in John 21:1 when Jesus appears to the disciples after they have decided to go back to fishing after Jesus has been crucified. Again the disciples were on their boat trying to fish but without luck when Jesus appears “epi tēs thalassēs” but this time the translation says Jesus appeared to his disciples “along the shore” of the lake. Barclay asks the not unreasonable question why should a phrase translated as “along the shore” in one part of John’s gospel be translated “on the water” in another part of the same gospel. I have checked a number of translations and the only translation I can find that in John 6:19 that Jesus walked on the does not water or the sea is the Living Bible which says “walking towards the boat”. Barclay is quite emphatic he writes *“In John 21:1 this very phrase means beyond argument – it has never been questioned – that Jesus was walking on the seashore”*. He goes on to maintain that it is this meaning that should be applied to John 6:19 rather than “walking on water”.

The words following the “walking on the water” phrase appear to confirm Barclay’s view that Jesus was actually walking on the sea-shore. Verse 22 “The disciples wanted to take him into the boat but suddenly the boat reached the shore where they were headed. So

the boat was close to the shore before Jesus appeared and it does seem reasonable that he would have actually been on the shore although in the moon light it might have appeared that he was on the surface of the lake. An optical illusion that became a miracle.

So even if this was not a miracle Barclay writes that there is still much to gain from this passage. John saw wonders, wonders that are still with us:

- **John saw that Jesus watches.** Up on the hills Jesus was watching them, He had not forgotten them as He walked around the head of the lake. But he allowed them to fight their own battles against the elements and win their own victory
- **John saw that Jesus comes.** Jesus comes down from the hills just when the disciples needed him for that last pull to the safety of the shore.
- **John saw that Jesus brings help.** He watches, he comes and He helps.
- **John saw that Jesus brings us to the haven.** To John the fisherman it seemed that Jesus arrived just as they made that last stroke of their oars that brought the boat to the safe haven and the keel grated on the shingle.

Barclay sums this all up with the words:

"It is one of the loveliest things in the Fourth Gospel, that John, the old fisherman turned evangelist, found all the wealth of Christ in the memory of a fisherman's story."

So what can we get from these two readings, certainly there is as much excitement in these biblical stories as in any Hollywood block

buster. There is betrayal, murder and miracles even if the miracles may not be super-natural.

From David we can get that even the greatest of leaders are human and can fall to human temptation. David did eventually understand the great wrong he had done and was repentant and is still one of the great characters of the Old Testament. Our leaders today are human and just as Jesus resisted the temptation of Kingship so we should resist the temptation of putting our leaders, particularly political leaders, on pedestals or thrones, at least not until they are dead!!!

The feeding of the five thousand, the escape from Kingship and the crossing of the lake help us understand the completeness of Jesus. How he demonstrated ways to love our neighbour.

These three events remind me of that verse from Micah "To Do Justice, Love Kindness and walk humbly with our God."

Amen