

worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 28th July 2024
Proper 12 | Ordinary 17
The Revd Andy Braunston

Note

Like Bonnie Tyler we might be holding out for a hero! In our culture we tend to like the larger-than-life figures that capture the national imagination. We're just over a General Election campaign where for 6 long weeks our political leaders offered their visions for our future. In 2019 it was rather different with two larger than life, unlikely, figures in Messers Corbyn and Johnson offering startlingly different visions for the future. Both were lauded by their tribes; Mr Johnson, however learned to reach beyond his natural base and won a landslide majority. The hero of the Brexit referendum became prime minister vanquishing the hero of the left. A few short years later and the Brexit winning hero was ejected from office for having feet of clay and a penchant for rule breaking parties. Heroes might be interesting and fun but might not make the best political leaders! So, in worship we explore heroes and villains, saints and sinners, foolish and wise.

Call to Worship

Fools say in their heart there is no God; yet we come to worship the Most High who looks down from heaven **to see if there are any who are wise who seek after God.**

Fools seek to confound the plans of the poor, **but the Lord is the refuge of the destitute and downtrodden.**

We, like the Psalmist, divide the world into saints and sinners, heroes and villains, foolish and wise - yet life is more complex. So, today we come to God **with our pain and our praise, our sin and our success, our strengths and our weaknesses.**

We know that God loves both foolish and wise, and turns our world, and our ideas, upside down.

Prayers of Approach, Confession and Grace

We come to worship today, Eternal One,
foolish and wise, saint and sinner, hero and villain,
knowing you love us deeply and unconditionally.

We come to worship today, Risen Lord Jesus,
whole yet broken, fearfully made - yet flawed,
knowing you feel our pain, hold us when we are despondent,
and laugh with us in our joy.

We come to worship today, Most Holy Spirit,
seeking wisdom but often finding only foolishness,
knowing you work within us but conscious we ignore your promptings.

We come to worship today, Life-Giving Trinity, conscious of our failings
yet confident in your love which redeems and heals us.
Give us time, we ask, to truly change, to turn our lives around,
that your wisdom may fill us, that your love may free us
and that your Gospel may enthuse us. Amen.

Friends, God looks on us with loving kindness,
forgives us even when we are far off, and roots and grounds us in love,
that we might know and live the breadth and length
and height and depth of God's own fullness.
We are forgiven, have the courage to forgive others
and the strength to forgive yourselves. Amen.

Introduction to the Readings

In today's Old Testament reading we read of King David, a hero of Biblical history but whose fatal flaws leave us puzzling about both his sanctity and his sinfulness. Was he wise or incredibly foolish? The Psalmist divides the world into fools and wise folk but we know life is a little more complicated; we can each be incredibly wise but our flaws mean that often our foolishness wins out. Like David we're complex mixes of sanctity and sinfulness. Paul, another rather complex Biblical figure, urges us to understand the fullness of God's grace which allows our emptiness to comprehend much about God's loving kindness. We pray for illumination as we listen for God's Word.

Prayer of Illumination

Guide our foolish minds, O God,
that as we hear your Word read and proclaimed,
we may perceive the riches of your grace,
comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of your grace, and know the
love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that our emptiness may be filled with your fullness. Amen.

Readings

2 Samuel 11:1-15 | Psalm 14 | Ephesians 3: 14 – 21

All Age Activity

The Children and Youth Work team have some excellent ideas on heroes and villains here

<https://urc.org.uk/your-faith/children-young-people/children-youth-work/heroes-villains/>

Sermon Notes

Heroes with feet of clay

Despite our own humanity we want heroes who fit our preconceptions, do nothing wrong, and answer the problems in our world. We know too well the foibles of our political heroes; those who are lauded now in the afterglow of the General Election will soon find their own feet of clay are exposed and chipped away at until their careers end in tears. We tell stories of our heroes but, of course, our stories are always partial. We tell of Churchill leading the country against the Nazi threat in the 1940s but forget to tell of his racism and imperialism. We rightly laud Queen Elizabeth I for moderate policies in religion in an age of extremes and for making England strong in an unstable era, yet forget her support of slavery and murder of Catholic missionaries. In our tradition we might think of Oliver Cromwell as a hero seeking to push back against the might of kings, advance Independency in religion, and to seek democratic reforms yet forget to tell of his butchery in Ireland and how he, like the king he displaced, refused to let the English Parliament meet. Being a hero, it seems, isn't straight forward!

2 Samuel

David is clearly a hero of the faith. The shepherd boy who slew Goliath, the musician who soothed an ill king, a fearsome warrior against Philistines determined to push the Jewish people away from their newly taken land. David secured the Kingdom, subdued its enemies, and left the Kingdom in a good state for his son. Yet David had no claim to the throne; he married Saul's daughter and toyed with Jonathan - the Crown Prince – his music soothed the mentally ill Saul, and he inveigled his way into the Royal Family. He allowed himself to be anointed King whilst Saul was still on the throne and conducted a guerilla war. When he became king he was not an altogether attractive figure.

In today's reading a tragic story of power and patriarchy takes shape. We're used to hearing this story as "David's adultery with Bathsheba" as if there was consent. Yet we hear almost nothing from Bathsheba. She is not able to refuse the King who sends his people to bring her his palace. After the rape Bathsheba discovers she is pregnant and tells the King who then plots to have her husband, Uriah killed. Being honourable Uriah, a non-Jew, kept the law about not having marital relationships when at war. All those verses about Uriah being invited to wash his feet were really about David hoping he'd go home and sleep with his wife and so, 9 months or so later assume the child was his. Having Uriah killed shows David's own feet of clay. A Biblical patriarch fit for the *Me Too* age. One wonders why the rabbis kept this story in the Bible; it's hardly edifying, it's not

a story we want told to the Sunday School and, when preaching about this story, it's hard to find hymns which reflect the theme! Yet maybe the Rabbis were wiser than we give them credit for. The story still stimulates us. We see David as a bit creepy by not looking away when he saw Bathsheba take her bath. We puzzle over Bathsheba's almost silent part in this part of the story and admire her in the rest of the story as she protects her son Solomon's claim to the throne becoming the most powerful woman in Israel. We ponder how a victim of rape gains the upper hand over a weakened king. We read of David's repentance and wonder if he was truly sorry - David is very clear he sinned against God - as Psalm 50 puts it "against you, you alone have I sinned." But David sinned also against Bathsheba and Uriah and no contrition seems to be expressed to Bathsheba nor about Uriah. Maybe we're just used now to powerful people shedding a few tears and blaming others for their own mistakes. David is clearly a sinner - a schemer, a usurper, a rapist and a murderer. Yet the Biblical authors saw him as a saint too; many Psalms are attributed to him and his complicated relationship with God is one that still intrigues us. Maybe, he was both foolish and wise.

Psalm 14

Our Psalmist liked to divide the world into two - the fools who said there is no God and the wise to seek after God's own heart. The fools who oppress the poor and the wise to defend and protect them. The fools do evil, the wise do good. We can see the Psalmist's point, we can agree there is evil done by foolish folk and, of course, we like to think of ourselves as wise! If we'd run the country we wouldn't have tanked the economy, if we'd run the Post Office we'd have wised up more quickly to the Horizon computer system scandal - or so we'd like to think. Of course, life is more complex than that, more complicated than the Psalmist seems to suggest. We are simultaneously wise and foolish. We are both sinner and saint. We know our sinfulness isn't at the depths the Psalmist sees but also know our wisdom might not be up to great standards too! We muddle through as best we can hoping to avoid the depths of foolishness which damage others and hoping for God's wisdom which raises the poor.

Ephesians

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul reaches to wisdom's height with moving words showing how much he perceived of God's loving kindness. This man who once was a zealot persecutor of the Church plumbs the riches of God's glory. This faithful apostle who knew something about the mess that God's people can get themselves into both encouraged new believers and had no hesitation in telling them off. In today's passage he commends the believers in Ephesus to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit. A precarious group of Christians who were outsiders in many ways to their world. They'd rejected either the pagan systems of belief if they were gentiles meaning they'd be seen as anti-social outsiders, or the religion of their forebears if they were Jewish meaning they'd risk ostracization by their families. This group of new believers had to navigate their faith in a world which didn't understand them and saw them as foolish. This group of baby Christians had to seek God's wisdom in a world which was interested in wealth and power.

They had to learn how to be saints and deal with their own sinfulness. They had to contend with the heroes of their world being seen, in God's eyes, as rather lacking and, of course, like us they had to see themselves as a mix of good and bad. To them Paul urged they be rooted and ground in love, that they understood the breadth, length, height and depth of Christ's love that surpasses knowledge. Paul wanted them to be filled with God's fullness – a good wish for us now too.

Weaving the Threads

We have thoughts of the foolish and the wise, the saint and the sinner, and the outsiders grounded in God's love? We might...

be gentler and more realistic with ourselves. Those Christians who major on their sinfulness can struggle with low self-esteem. Those Christians who see themselves as saints can struggle with a lack of self-awareness. Maturity sees both our sinfulness and our sanctity often in a creative tension.

be gentler and more realistic with the heroes and villains of our age. The press likes to set up and destroy people. Think how members of the Royal family are feted and fetishised - only to forfeit the manufactured adoration that is given them. Think of political heroes whose feet of clay soon undermine them. It's easy, and sometimes good fun, to criticise but I wonder if we'd be any different. It's good to hold our political leaders to account but also to be aware of their own humanity. It's harder to think compassionately of the villains in our world but, again, we know little of what drives people to evil and failure.

be gentler and more realistic about our complex humanity. To be human is to be both wise and foolish, saint and sinner, hero and villain. To see this in others is hard, to see it in ourselves is almost impossible. The rabbis included this story of David to remind us of these hard facts. Life, faith, and morality can be very complex yet, as Paul reminds us God's power is at work within us to abundantly accomplish far more than we can ever ask or imagine.

Post Sermon Prayer

Eternal Trinity,
help us to understand ourselves better,
to marvel in our ability to be saints,
and to puzzle over our tendency to be sinners;
to wonder about our heroic qualities, and to despair over our villainy;
to balance our wisdom and our foolishness,
so that, in all things we may understand you better
and fathom the riches of your loving kindness. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith

We believe God fearfully and wonderfully made us;
yet we are flawed so that the good we want to do
is often hampered by our own failings;
we struggle to be saints yet are often sinners.

We read the ancient stories of God's faithful, yet faltering, servants;
we read of their great and wicked deeds,
and, if we are honest, see ourselves in those stories,
as both heroes and villains.

We want, like the poets of old, to divide the world into foolish and wise
yet know that life is more complex than that easy division;
we see our own wisdom and foolishness at play in our lives.

Yet the immeasurable riches of God's grace reaches even us,
lifting, healing, and inspiring us,
saints and sinners, heroes and villains, wise and foolish,
calling us to be God's people, the Church. Amen.

Intercessions

Generous God,
we give you thanks for the heroes of our world,
those who selflessly serve in our public services,
those who volunteer for a multitude of good causes,
those who care for the infirm and ill.
Give grace to all who serve,
and change our hearts that we may value selfless kindness
more than might, wealth or power.

pause

Gracious God,
we pray for those who we often see as villains in our world,
those who use public life to enrich themselves,
those who blame others for their mistakes,
those who allow profit to pollute our rivers and lakes,
those who deny the harm we do to the earth our mother,
and those who resort to violence for their own ends.
Give time, O God, for repentance,
that those who are villains may become heroes
through contrition and real change.

pause

Wise God,
we give thanks for those who have wisdom in our world,
scientists who tell us what we are doing to the planet,
historians who point out the blind spots in our histories,
teachers who help us learn new ways of living,
activists who provoke us to change.
Allow us, O God, to reject the foolishness
we see in ourselves and in our world,
that we may learn your wisdom.

pause

Healing God,
we pray for those who are in any kind of need,
those known to us, and those known to you alone

longer pause

O God,
sustain us in the complexity of our humanity as you sustained David-
playing the harp of youth,
throwing stones at giant problems,
loving our friends beyond wisdom,
dancing worship, mourning children,
breaking our hearts in psalms, and
longing for warmth in our old bones. Amen.

(final intercession from Vanderbilt Lectionary resources)

We join all our prayers together as we pray as Jesus taught, Our Father...

Offertory

We want to be wise with our money but are often foolish! We want to be heroes with the causes we support but often end up using it to support the villains of our world. We long for sanctity but sin clings to us like mud. Yet, God's loving kindness always enables us to lift ourselves up and pursue wisdom. We know our resources can make such a difference in our world and so we give; to charities and good causes, to those in need and, of course, to the Church. We may give through standing orders or little envelopes, we may ensure our giving attracts Gift Aid, we know we should be regular in our giving so that budgets can be balanced. So let's pray for all that's given:

Eternal God, bless, we ask, these gifts
and the time, love, work and sacrifice they represent,
that we may proclaim your coming Kingdom
where the wise will be blessed,
and your foolishness will reign. Amen.

Blessing

May God's foolishness make you wise;
may God's weakness make you strong;
may you who are both saints and sinners, heroes and villains,
grow through the riches of God's grace, into your full potential,
and the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be with you now and always, Amen.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Sing of the Lord's Goodness		157	65	
Oh the life of the world is a joy and a treasure		141	114	
From all that dwell below the skies	723	146	75	
Praise the Lord His Glories Show	102	152	84	
If You Believe and I Believe		771		
Praise, I Will Praise You Lord		175		
Ye Holy Angels Bright	125	179	69	783
Sing to the Lord A Joyful Song	77	184		929
Lord of Life We Come To You		782	651	
Sing to God New Songs of Worship		173		600
O God of Blessings, All Praise To You (Soli Deo Gloria!)		177		

Why not start worship with a recording of Bonnie Tyler's *Holding Out for a Hero* ?

You may wish to listen to, or learn to sing, *The Canticle of the Turning* a powerful setting of the Magnificat to an Irish Tune. It's easily found online.