

7 August 2011 – 12 noon

2 Samuel 13:22-33

We know David the shepherd boy.

We know David the giant slayer.

We know David playing his harp, David composer of Psalms.

We know David the great king of Israel.

But do we know this David, David the aging father of a large dysfunctional family that is tearing itself apart with violence, rape and murder?

Do we want to know this David, this family and the chaos that it has produced?

Wouldn't we rather stick with all the nice bits and just ignore this messy stuff, that sounds like the worst of celebrity scandals and daytime soaps. In fact this story may be too violent, too graphic for Shortland Street – it could be plot of the next big gangster movie.

But maybe we do know this story all too well, played out down the street or over the back fence or even within our own families.

Over the past week the *Tia*<sup>1</sup> readings have traced the path that has led to today's scene of hatred and murder. It began when David saw the wife of Uriah, and was filled with lust, sent for her, slept for her, and then sent her home. And when she sent the message that she was pregnant, David arranged for Uriah to come home from the battlefield in the hope that he would sleep with his wife – but Uriah refused to sleep in comfort in his own bed while his soldiers are camped on the battlefield. So David instead sent him back the army, carrying the letter which was his death warrant: “Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw so that he will be struck down and die”. And so Uriah died. This is where it began - David guilty of rape and adultery and of murder.

Through Nathan the prophet, God condemned David's behaviour.<sup>2</sup> “Why have you despised the word of the Lord to do what is evil in his sight? You struck down Uriah and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword will never depart from your house.”

Nathan's condemnation describes the effect that violence has in a family. It is not so much that God will punish David by making this happen, by directly wielding the sword against him and his family. Rather, God knows and warns David that there are consequences to violent actions, that violence has ongoing effects within the web of family relationships, that violence begets violence.

And so we come to the events of chapter 13. Yesterday's reading told of the rape of Tamar by her half brother Amnon, David's first born. Amnon fell in love with Tamar, and planned how to take what he wanted by force. He pretended to be ill, asked that Tamar should come and prepare for him a special meal, then sent everyone else away. Despite her very clear and eloquent 'no', he overpowered her and raped her. And then his love, or lust, turned to loathing, and he threw her out. Amnon had no regard for Tamar beyond the gratification of his own desires – he used her and then was through with her. Tamar begged him not to make his assault on her even worse by rejecting her afterwards - sending her away like that exposed Tamar to a life of permanent shame, without a full part in the community, unable to marry or bear children.

When Amnon rejected her, Tamar did not go quietly – she publicly tore her special robe and covered her head in ashes, and went away crying, like a person in mourning. She did not want to hide what had been done to her, to pretend it hadn't happened. However, her brother Absalom advised her to keep quiet: “Don't take this to heart” he says, which sounds awfully like “There there, don't make a fuss”.

As happens to many victims of rape, Tamar is met by a wall of silence surrounding her, shutting her off from telling her story, leaving her desolate in her brother's house.

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1 Scripture Union daily Bible reading plan, followed by Cook Islands congregations

2 2 Samuel 12:9.10

But Absalom her brother hated Amnon for what he had done. For two years he hated Amnon because of the rape of his sister. And then he took action. He planned a party up in the hill country, out of Jerusalem, to celebrate the end of sheep shearing. He invited his father and brothers, but when his father the king said “No we won't come – that would be a burden to you” Absalom asked specifically if Amnon could come with the other brothers. And then Absalom planned for the murder, arranging with his servants that on Absalom's command they would strike Amnon down. And it happened.

Rape and murder – the pattern of behaviour seen in David is repeated by his sons. David's own actions in the 'taking' of Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah provided the model for Absalom's violent use of power to fulfil his own desires. Amnon's brutal rape of Tamar kindles a hatred in Absalom that will lead to further violence. Absalom's violent revenge drives him into exile which leads to rebellion, war and further deaths. This story is a reminder that resorting to violence and exploitation gives rise to continuing chains of tragedy and suffering. Acts of violence are seldom isolated events. Their repercussions echo down through the years and through families, bringing destruction and devastation.

Violence breeds violence. That is the truth that we see played out in this story of David's family. That is the truth we see played out in our own communities and families.

Children brought up in families where violence is regularly used, will continue the same patterns of behaviour when they grow up.

Young people who have not learned alternative ways of dealing with disagreements or disappointment will lash out against those around them when they are angry or hurt or frustrated.

Men who have suffered abuse from fathers or brothers find themselves inflicting violence on their children and wives, apparently unable to stop repeating the pattern, no matter how much they want to.

Women who have been victims of abuse come to believe that there is no other way to live, that no one would believe their story anyway, and that this is all they are worth.

How do we stop these cycles of violence?

How do we learn different patterns of behaviour from lashing out at one another?

How do we build families and communities where violence is not normal, not acceptable?

After David's sin was exposed, he confessed it before God and repented, turned away from it. But when this cycle of violence began to appear in his own family, he remained silent. In verse 21 we read of David's response to the rape of his daughter - “When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn.”

Perhaps it was also his own shame – how could he condemn his son for doing what he himself had done? For whatever reasons, David was angry, but took no action. But it takes more than anger to break the cycle of violence – it takes action, a willingness to name what has happened and to act to prevent it happening again.

Because David would not act, the violence produced further violence – Absalom waited for two years brewing his hatred, and then took matters into his own hands, turning violently on his brother. No doubt he believed that his violence was justified, as avenging his sister's honour, but righteous violence is still violence, and still feeds into the ongoing cycle of violence. Neither Absalom's solution of taking justice violently into his own hands nor David's refusal to take any action at all deals with the problem of the cycle of violence.

In our own times, these lessons are being learned. The TV ad campaign “It's not OK” reminds us that the cycle of violence in our families and in our society needs to be broken – by naming it, by talking about it, by asking for help, by supporting one another to find new patterns of behaviour.

As we read this story of David and his family we need to be as honest as the Bible is about the damaging consequences of violence, and to speak out against it rather than saying nothing, to ask for help when we need it, to learn new responses, new ways of behaving, and to teach them to our children by our example.

Jesus was called “Son of David”. And Jesus broke the cycle of violence once and for all – by refusing to be part of it. You remember his hard sayings in Matthew 5: “Love your enemies and pray for those who

persecute you. When someone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other cheek also.”

Jesus refused to use violence against those who were his enemies. Peter tells us, in 1 Peter 2, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate, when he suffered, he made no threats”.

Jesus refused to use the power of violence – instead he demonstrated the power of love which some believe looks weak, but is the only thing strong enough to break the cycle of violence.

Jesus died a violent death on the cross to deal a death blow to the power of violence, and in Jesus' resurrection he unleashed the power of a new way of living into the world.

Jesus calls us to follow him, to turn away from our old ways of living and to live in this new way, in the power of his resurrection.

Are we willing to hear his call, to follow his example, to obey his command and to break the cycle of violence in our own lives and in the community around us?