

The original languages are, for most of us, unintelligible. The stories were first recorded thousands of years ago. The cultures inhabited by the principal characters are completely beyond our understanding. And yet these sixty-six books, gathered together as one collection around 1500 years ago, have become our stories. Foundational to our faith; beautiful expressions of the grace of God revealed to the world. They are Holy stories, here in this Holy book, and we would be lost without them.

But let's be honest...some of these stories are beyond tragic. Many of the moments captured by the Old and New Testaments leave us shaking our heads in confusion or shaking our fists at God. And this morning we get to do a little of both.

We accept that in the gospels (and especially John's gospel) that Jesus seems to speak in riddles. Metaphors that are difficult to translate into English; parables that speak of a way of life we have never known; a speech on the nature of bread, hunger, life and meaning (here in John chapter 6) is full of nuance and wordplay that only works if you remember that Jesus spoke neither English nor reek, but Aramaic - a language rooted in Hebrew whose words for bread and life are eerily similar.

But the confusion that the New Testament brings us is nothing compared to the disturbing themes we find in the Old Testament. These are the Scriptures of swift justice; full of stories of conquering armies, and ravaging warriors, and God - not so much in the background, but standing just off stage, whispering instructions and taking sides. And this morning's reading from 2 Samuel 12: 1-15 is among the most difficult to comprehend.

It follows a pretty nasty piece of work by David - the hero. He has won the throne (in a civil war) and is taking a rest from the fighting when he discovers a beautiful woman. One thing leads to another (that, at least, never changes) and Bathsheeba tells him that she's pregnant. She also happens to be the wife of one of David's fighting men. As the story goes, David has Uriah recalled from the fighting and tries to convince him to spend some 'quality time' with his wife. Uriah refuses. David sends him back to the front, and orders his commanders to abandon Uriah to be killed. And suddenly - sadly - David has a new wife and a new son.

So far this is just soap-opera stuff; nothing new under heaven. Humans are driven by their desires, and David proves himself human. But David has also been blessed and called by God. The Lord's anointed; ruler of Israel. Surely God will have something to say. And sure enough, Nathan comes to call. Nathan the prophet. Nathan the king's conscience. Nathan tells a story, and the king is enraged. This parable has the king seeing red, and David declares "the man deserves death" - that's when Nathan springs the trap. You are that man.

David's treachery - never mind his adultery - is worthy of a death sentence...but the wrong character dies. A muttered apology, and David (it seems) will live to sin again. Not so his infant son. "Nevertheless, because you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child will die."

Now I don't know about you, but this story always leaves me breathless - and speechless. The inevitable questions arise; "Is THIS God's will?" "Does God care so little?" "Is God's love and mercy and grace so easily manipulated?" Answers are not so easily found.

Human stories are complicated. The best of us have character traits that don't play so well in full public view. And the stories that come together in Scripture are, first of all, human stories. True, they are humans stories about an encounter with God, but God's character is described in human terms - God is given human emotions; God occasionally sounds (acts - appears) as an incredibly clever, and powerful character - super-human. It can't be helped. For all our cleverness, we have yet to discover a language that can adequately describe God. With several thousand years of practice, still the best we can do is make God sound more aware, more powerful, more....everything than us. Some of you (and you're not alone) might wonder why we bother with these difficult stories. "Give me the New Testament - let's stick with the gospels - Jesus is really all we need" - I've heard these statements, and I sympathize. But Jesus built his teaching on the foundation of what we call the Old Testament. Smarter people than me have suggested that without the history of the struggle of God's people to describe their 'chosen-ness'; without generations of study and discussion and prayerful devotion to the mystery of God's mercy and grace; without the Old Testament, there is no understanding the New Testament. We need to see how the ideas of covenant and calling, and justice and redemption are developed (and mis-represented, and abused, and rediscovered), to fully appreciate how all these things are revealed in Jesus.

These human stories are wonderfully complicated, and even at their best, they are poor attempts to describe God's motives. We must try, though. We must try to discover God's purpose - we are compelled to find meaning in the things that surround us (and especially in the things that happen to us) So even now, we can be heard to say of some tragedy or another "it's part of God's plan..." That's rubbish, of course - to imagine that God has a plan which requires unspeakable tragedy must darken our lives.

What is certainly true - even in David's story - is that tragedy does not signal the absence of God. God's promise to David isn't withdrawn the moment David is caught committing adulterous murder. David is still king, and God will still deal with David according to the promise.

What is always true, is that God continues to work with us through the bad to find the good. Refining (over and over again, if necessary) the rough raw material of humanity, hoping to eventually expose a glimmer of our true nature: the loving, God-breathed, “very good” creatures with whom the story begins and ends.

The good with the bad, they say. No pain, no gain, they say. And these are lessons that the canon of Scripture proves for us. The story is only good news when it is all the news. Failure and frustration. Confusion and calamity. And somehow, ridiculous redemption. Taken together, these stories we call Holy Scripture help us see that even our worst behaviour, or our worst interpretations of God’s intentions cannot keep us from the best that God has to offer. Love. Life. Redemption. The whole story is necessary.