

SERMON: 18 August 2019 – Rev Brenda Robson**“Samson – Flawed Hero?”****(Judges 14:5 – 20 & 15:1 – 8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-7)**

We all know the story of Samson, don't we? We probably heard the story of Samson as children. Samson and Goliath are the two mighty strong men in the bible, physically strong and powerful, giants among mere mortals. The two great cranes that are familiar landmarks on the Belfast skyline are called Samson and Goliath. Always useful to know in a pub quiz!

We think of Goliath as a bad man and Samson as a good man, a hero. Goliath was the Philistine, the enemy of the Israelites, killed by David. Samson was God's man who ultimately stood up against the Philistines and began the liberation of the Israelites from Philistine oppression.

I remember from my children's story book that Samson was God's man from birth, he lived a simple life eating wild honey, God gave him superhuman strength and he defeated many enemies, he was a judge in Israel and he married Delilah. The only weakness we might remember Samson having was to reveal to Delilah the secret that his long hair was the source of his strength and if it was cut he would lose that strength and become weak. Delilah betrayed him, his hair was cut, he was captured and he was blinded. He is redeemed in the end when his hair grows back and God gives him enough strength to bring down the huge building occupied by many Philistines who were killed and, of course, Samson was killed too.

But there is so much more to Samson's life than this, so much that children are not told! He was such a flawed character, a dubious hero in many ways.

His behavior is troubling not only to modern readers but also to his own compatriots. He is far from the ideal leader. He is violent and short-tempered; he is promiscuous and he wishes to marry outside his kin group. Eventually the Philistines and the Israelites are out to get him and when it all gets too much and too dangerous, it is the Israelites who bind up Samson and hand him over to the Philistines.

So even the Jews are not sure how to view him and his true character is debated in the Talmud, the Jewish scriptures.

At one point it says, negatively, that Samson's eyes were gouged out as a punishment for following the desires of his eyes, in other words choosing the wrong wives and entertaining prostitutes – not in my children's story book!

But then the Talmud questions the justice of this, asking how Samson could be punished because his life from conception to death was in God's hands. When the angel came to Samson's parents, who were childless, and told them they would have a son, he was to be a Nazirite, set apart for God from birth and he would begin the deliverance of the Israelites from the hands of the Philistines. Samson did complete this task at the end of his life although his journey through life was not always reflective of a life set apart for God.

The Talmud finds a middle ground. Samson may have followed his own inclinations but the master plan was God's. His motivations may have been questionable at times but God's will for his life came to fruition in the end.

Perhaps we are all in this middle ground when it comes to using our talents, acknowledging that our gifts come from God, giving God the glory for our successes. Because Samson's story is ultimately about acknowledging that our gifts and our strengths come from God and they are to be used in the service of God and others. God is to be praised and thanked. All the glory is to point to God and Jesus Christ and not to ourselves.

We sing **All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, so thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.**

There are no hymns of praise coming from Samson's lips to glorify God. So different from that other flawed, all too human hero, David. David was given kingly power and great strength too but he never forgot that God was the source of his inspiration. The Passion Translation says that many of his psalms are pure praise, inspired by the breath of God. Praise is a matter of life and breath. As long as David had breath, he would praise God.

Samson didn't sing songs of praise to God. Samson did sing a song after single-handedly killing 1,000 Philistines but the song was about Samson. We are told (verse 14) the spirit of God came upon him to give him the supernatural power to be victorious over the enemy but what did he sing?

**With a donkey's jaw-bone I have made donkeys of them
With a donkey's jaw-bone I have killed a thousand men**

"I have made" and "I have killed." He did not always remember that he was dependant on God. God was Samson's strength but he didn't always recognise it. He was arrogant and self focused and proud.

Perhaps he had to be ruthless and intimidating in a time when the society around him was lawless and immoral. We are told (Judges 21 : 25) **"In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."** Samson was a judge in Israel for twenty years, the last judge before the time of Samuel and the first of the kings, Saul.

Samson liked to set clever riddles to trap people, to get his own way. Samson the Riddler.

In contrast, David said in Psalm 49, **I will break open mysteries with my music and my song will release riddles solved."**

David's words were crafted to reveal to others God's wisdom and love and beauty and faithfulness. Today they still help people in their daily devotions and prayers to understand God more deeply and to find answers to some of the riddles and complexities of life.

Samson's riddles were to confuse and manipulate others, to get his own way.

And Samson liked to get his own way. He was raised by devout, god-fearing parents who had had an angelic visitation and who were good Israelites. How shocked they must have been when Samson told them that a Philistine woman had caught his eye and he wanted them to secure her as his wife. He wanted to marry a woman from the enemy camp! This was worse than the Montagues and Capulets, Romeo and Juliet!

The angel had said Samson would deliver the Israelites from Philistine tyranny and here he was declaring that he would marry a Philistine, their first grandchild would be part Philistine!

His parents tried to sway him but their rebuke was quite restrained and mild under the circumstances – **“Isn’t there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?”** (verse 14 : 3)

But Samson was determined and perhaps even his parents were afraid to push him too far in what they saw as a major sin, a disgraceful choice for a chosen one of God.

But then at verse 14 : 4 – **His parents did not know that this (the taking of a Philistine wife) was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines for at that time they were ruling over Israel.**

I find these verses to be so full of hope and promise, an insight into how God works out his purposes.

Samson is a rebellious sinner. He thinks he is being rebellious, picking out a bride who is right in his eyes.

His parents are weak and ineffectual. They cannot stand up to him or direct him onto what they would see is a better path.

And all the while God is on his throne, bringing to pass his great purposes for the salvation of his chosen people even (and especially) in their spectacular sins.

Things would get worse before they got better. Samson was on a downward spiral and his parents must have watched him in great confusion and anxiety. And yet God was still in control, still focused on the bigger picture.

In the end, Samson would eventually say **O Sovereign Lord, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more.** And he expressed willingness to die in the cause of defeating the Philistines.

Samson may have been a flawed hero but his life story would make it into holy scripture, would still be read and studied thousands of years later. He is found not only in the book of Judges but also in Hebrews where he is included in a list of the champions of faith alongside Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, David, Samuel and others (Hebrews 11 : 32)

Samson is part of the bigger story that tells of God's love for all his people, the story that culminates in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Recent Christian commentaries have viewed Samson as a kind of Jesus Christ based on similarities between Samson's story and the life of Jesus.

Samson's and Jesus' birth were both foretold by angels who predicted that they would save their people

Samson was born to a woman who could not have children and Jesus was born to a virgin

Samson defeated a lion; Jesus defeated Satan, whom Peter describes as "a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"

Samson's betrayal by Delilah has been compared to Jesus' betrayal by Judas, both were paid by pieces of silver for their respective deeds

Brewer in his guide to Scripture History notes that **Samson was blinded, insulted and enslaved prior to his death and that Jesus was blindfolded, insulted and treated as a slave prior to his crucifixion.**

Brewer also compares Samson's death among the wicked with Christ being crucified between two thieves.

Paintings of Samson often have him in a crucifixion pose with arms outstretched between the two pillars as he pushes them apart and destroys the building.

These similarities are interesting but no more than that. They are relatively superficial and for me there are so many more differences between Samson and Jesus than there are similarities.

Samson was a flawed, sinful character and Jesus' character was without flaw or sin.

Jesus was a man of peace not violence

A man of forgiveness and not retribution

A man who turned the other cheek and did not seek an eye for an eye

A man who walked closely with God day by day

A man who only spoke the words that God gave him to speak

A man whose moral compass was above reproach

A man who respected women

But then Jesus was fully man and yet fully God.

I do not think that we should be comparing Samson with Jesus. But perhaps we could compare Samson with ourselves.

Samson had the God-given gift of physical strength. Our short New Testament reading tells us that we are all given different gifts by God.

There are different kinds of gifts but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working but the same God works all of them in all men and women. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12 : 4 – 6)

Do we recognise that all our gifts and talents come from God?

Do we give thanks to God frequently for these gifts and talents?

Do we use these gifts for the common good?

We might discover our inborn gifts as we grow up. But God can also develop new gifts in us, perhaps surprise us by calling us into a new activity or area of work that we had not considered before.

We might develop our gifts through education at school, college, university or on the job. It is fine to use our talents to earn a living, make money for ourselves and our families.

But we also need to consider how we can use our gifts in serving others without necessarily receiving payment or personal gain. That might include our deeds in the community, at work, in the church.

This is what Paul means when he writes that the Spirit gives us these things for the common good.

The Passion Translation gives these verses as follows –

It is the same Holy Spirit who continues to distribute many different varieties of gifts. The Lord Yahweh is one and he is the one who apportions to believers different varieties of ministries. The same God distributes different kinds of miracles that accomplish different results through each believer's gift and ministry as he energises and activates them. Each believer is given continuous revelation by the Holy Spirit to benefit not just himself or herself but all.

At the start of this new year in the church, as activities resume after the long summer break, are we ready to be energised and to activate our gifts? Ask the Holy Spirit for a fresh outpouring of energy and talents. Ask expectantly and then wait in anticipation that God can do a new thing in our lives.

Amen