

SERMON: 25 August 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“A Season in Judges: Samson and Delilah” (Judges 16:4-31 and Jeremiah 20:7-13)

Q: What does it mean to be strong in God? Discuss.

(Faith, confidence, security, hope, loving, truth, non violent?)

Q: What words come to mind when you think of Samson and Delilah?

Samson and Delilah’s relationship seems to have been characterised by none of these things but by lies, deception and insecurity. Delilah succumbs to the temptation to sell her husband for 100 shekels, about 13 kg silver (45p per gram = £6,500).

Ladies, would you sell your husband for £6,500? Think what you could buy with that. A new car? A deposit on a new house?....

And Samson isn’t truthful with her when she wants to know the secret of his power. Why not just say its because I’m dedicated to God? He can’t not know that surely. Surely his mother and father taught him that he is a Nazirite from birth.

But somehow through the lies and deception of their relationship, there is a thread of truth running through the story that holds it together and keeps drawing Samson back to his calling as one set apart by God, for God, what the Scriptures call a Nazirite.

It seems to me that Samson is a conflicted character. He seems to be torn between who he really is and who he’s living as. Conflicted between who he’s called to be and who he is currently living as. In many ways its the struggle of every human soul wrestling to be all its created to be; to break free from the fetters that hold us back.

[SLIDE] “The fact is that Samson has always been in rebellion against his separation to God. He has never wanted to fight the Philistines as he was destined to do. He has wanted to mix with them, intermarry with them, and party with them. He has especially wanted to have this woman, Delilah, because he loved her. But his separateness has always caught up with him, and turned his relationships with the Philistines sour. It is the Spirit that has propelled him into conflict with them. When he wanted to stop (15:7). He was not allowed to; the men of Judah took him out of hiding, and the Spirit had seized him and thrust him into battle with the Philistines again (15:14). And after that there had been no turning back”.

(The Book of Judges, Barry G Webb, page 405)

[SLIDE] Another commentator put it like this: “it is the hair that binds him to the God whose power is revealed in nature, the God who often prefers the wilderness to the city” (Susan Niditch, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*).

In fact, this commentator sees the conflict in Samson, as one between nature and culture, that’s why its ok to eat grapes which grow naturally but its not ok to drink fermented grapes, due to the human cultural intervention; like-wise hair should be left to grow without the need for man made implements to cut it.

But I think the more realistic tension or conflict is the one going on within Samson, between who he truly is and who he’s tempted to be.

I went to listen to a pastor speaking on Monday night about being shameless. It was refreshing. She asked us to think about something we wanted to let go of or not longer be ashamed of. And it was another opportunity for people to move forward in their life, to become more who they truly are meant to be, rather than a shadow or a fake version of their true selves.

One of the areas I think Samson was conflicted over was how to deal with opposition. The enemy opposition in his lifetime were the Philistines and throughout Samson’s 20 years as a Judge in Israel the two nations were at war.

So there’s war within Samson and there’s war out with.

And Samson is Israel’s war hero figure just as Goliath was the Philistines war hero. I link these two characters because the Books of Kings, Chronicles and Judges were probably all written about the same time by the same historians of Israel, sometime in the 6th century BC during the exile to Babylon.

It seems, that throughout history, there’s a human need within nations to have strong, tough, macho figures in power. And we can see that today especially in some governments around the world where its the tough, macho armed forces guys that are often up front in decision making.

But back to the question of how to deal with opposition. Man’s way is to seek vengeance.

[SLIDE] We can see it in Jeremiah’s complaint to the Lord culminating in him seeking vengeance on his enemies in chapter 20 verse 12:

Lord Almighty, you who examine the righteous
and probe the heart and mind,

let me see your vengeance on them,
for to you I have committed my cause.

At least he's leaving vengeance in the hands of the Lord which is the only safe place to put it in order to stop the destructive cycle of violence.

And at the end of the Samson story we see Samson desperate for revenge over the Philistines for gouging out his eyes.

On the World Day of Peace in 2017, Pope Francis said,

'When victims of violence are able to resist the temptation to retaliate, they become the most credible promoters of nonviolent peacemaking. In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms. [SLIDE] Violence is not the cure for our broken world.'

Jesus taught that the true battlefield, where violence and peace meet, is the human heart: for [SLIDE] "it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come" (Mark 7:21). . . . Jesus walked the path of nonviolence to the very end, to the cross . . . (Ephesians 2:14-16).

[SLIDE] As Richard Rohr puts it, "Whoever accepts the Good News of Jesus is able to acknowledge the violence within and be healed by God's mercy, becoming in turn an instrument of reconciliation."

Love your enemies is not just a command worth obeying, its a way of life worth living. Its the way of Christ. Its an attitude of the heart, a way of being in the world; a security and trust and hunger in God to deliver justice in God's way and God's time.

Blessed are the meek, the merciful and the peacemakers, those who are pure in heart and those who hunger and thirst for justice (Matthew 5). Such a hunger is rooted in an attitude of trust in God who is love and who has ultimate power. The way of non violence is the way for followers of Christ to live. Only that way has the power to overcome violence.

And there is now documented evidence to prove this.

In their book *Why Civil Resistance Works*, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan write about the effectiveness of nonviolence, drawing from examples in Iran, Palestine, the Philippines, and Burma. Based on in-depth research, they observe that nonviolent resistance is [SLIDE] "nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts." Nonviolent

campaigns have greater participation, loyalty, resilience, innovation, and civic impact than violent ones.

Take, for example, Leymah Gbowee, the 2011 Nobel prize winner from Liberia. . . . She organized pray-ins and nonviolent protests that resulted in high-level peace talks to end the second civil war in Liberia. . . . The contributions of such women as Gbowee in Liberia and Marguerite Barankitse in Burundi are showing the way to the eventual cessation of violence and the dawning of peace. . . .

Here we have more examples of women managing to bring peace where men have failed. The nations need more women in leadership. Men have too often failed due, I think, to their unwillingness to surrender power and control.

Jesus of Nazareth never had that problem. And he's our Guide, Christ is our life, whether we're male or female, black or white.

Jesus wasn't a conflicted character like Samson, and he never gave in to violence. Jesus knew who he was, where he'd come from, why he'd come and where he was headed.

Jesus epitomised true strength without violence as trust in God and God's unconditional love for enemies.

[SLIDE] As Walter Wink says in his book *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (2003),

"Love of enemies has, for our time, become the litmus test of authentic Christian faith. Love of enemies is the recognition that the enemy, too, is a child of God."

Jesus brought grace into the world. He has brought us new ways of living in the power of grace.

One of my favourite verses in the Samson story is when it says in verse 22, [SLIDE] 'But then his hair started to grow again'.

What does it say to you about God's involvement in Samson's life? That despite all his flaws, the grace of God is there to bless Samson and to give him yet another chance to be who he is truly meant to be, a child of God, strong but not violent.

God never gives up on us even though at times we might think he should. That's grace, amazing grace. I was blind but now I see.

John Newton wrote those words as an old blind man who'd begun to see with God's eyes. Maybe Samson too, in the end of his life, with his eyes blinded, learned to see God's grace more and more.

Some might say that maybe the pinnacle of Samson's life was its end?

[SLIDE] As King Malcolm said about Macbeth,

'Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it'

(Malcolm, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 4).

We might read into this that the point of this last event in Samson's life is to prove that the God of Samson is greater than the Philistine god of Damon. But why all the violence?

It seems to me that if God wants to show who's God then he doesn't tend to do it through violence but rather through love and non violence. For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son so that we would not perish but discover eternal life, life marked by love and peace.

Samson died a tragic death whilst the death of Christ has brought life to all humankind.

The way of Christ is the way to live and love, and the way to deal with conflict through peace making, a commitment to non violence and a love for all.