

# 20 June 2021 – Leadership 3

## UCA ANNIVERSARY REFLECTION

As I mentioned in my welcome, the 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the Uniting Church will be celebrated this week. So today is an opportunity to reflect on where we find ourselves as part of the Uniting Church and what the future may look like.

There is no doubt that the Uniting Church is smaller in numbers and less prominent in society than when it formed in 1977. Some might say that the inevitable trajectory is further decline into irrelevance and eventually death. Similar sentiment is voiced about other traditional denominations as well.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that we trust in the living God who has promised to build the Church and to bring new life even out of death. What this new life will look like for the Church is by no means sure but it may well look quite different to what we have experienced in the past.

On this day, though, I think it's helpful to remember what brought the Uniting Church into existence in the first place, which was a twofold impulse.

First was the daring theological and practical step to **unite together** as three groups of Christians – Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists - and to focus on **what draws us together** rather than on what separates us. We probably all agree that the Uniting Church is **a broad church**, with a diversity of views on many matters - but with core beliefs and practices that hold us together and which allow us to go forward together.

Second, we are a distinctly **Australian** church, with – in the words of our Basis of Union –

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*a desire to enter more fully into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia' and yet 'to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries*

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**Part of being an Australian church is our commitment to walk with our brothers and sisters in the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress** and to give due attention to the covenant we have with them.

Part of our commitment in recent years is to have a service each year on the Sunday before Australia Day where we stand in solidarity with our indigenous brothers and sisters and mourn with them and join with them in their search for justice, including a voice to our Federal Parliament. It's also why we include an acknowledgment of country at each of our services.



**What does the future hold for us as a Church?** The Basis of Union never set out any specific goals but rather left us some evocative images to inform our mission. I'll put some of these on the screen for you to ponder ...

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*The Church is ...  
a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal  
a fellowship of reconciliation  
an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness*

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When we get gloomy or anxious about the future, the Basis of Union reminds us that ...

- it is **God** who gives life to the dead, who brings into being what otherwise could not exist
- it is **Christ** who rules and renews his Church
- and it is the **Spirit** who reaches out through our human witness to awaken faith, and who ensures that we do not lose the way.

## **BIBLE READINGS** (Jill & Russell Davison)

**1 Samuel 17:1-11, 32-49**

Mark 4:35-41

### MESSAGE *Leading when the going gets tough*

I wonder how many giants you've met in your travels recently, or whether you've been out sailing and nearly drowned during a storm? No, I didn't think so.

But if I were to ask the question in a different way ... namely whether you've faced any major difficulties in your life recently or had to handle a really awkward person in your life, then you may have a different answer. Possibly yes, you have.

So how are we to **hear** and **interpret** the two familiar Bible stories that we heard read just before? And **what do they teach us about leaders and leadership?**

First up, we need to acknowledge that these stories are actually quite **confronting** on many levels ... the trauma of ancient warfare, the fear of drowning, the duty of care exercised by King Saul and by Jesus, the crazy bravado of David ... and the possible ways we are supposed to use Saul, David and Jesus as models for ourselves.



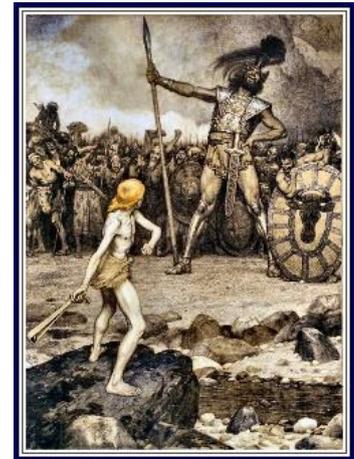
One common approach is to read these stories as **simple Sunday school lessons**. So David is the underdog and whenever we hear his name in the story we **cheer**, while Goliath is the big bad bully and every time we hear his name we **boo**. In essence, we reduce this story down to a simple message that David is the hero because he's the one who trusts in God.

Likewise for the story about the storm, Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat while the rest of us battle the storm and get frightened by the size of the waves. Then in a way not dissimilar to the Wiggles song we all shout 'Wake up, Jesus!' and Jesus stands up, says 'Be still' and the wind calms



down and everything becomes good. In true Sunday School style, Jesus is the hero – as always – who has almost godlike powers.

Another approach is to read these stories in their cultural and historical context ... as suggested in Bible commentaries. So we might study the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Philistines, and think about how ancient warfare was conducted. In this context, what David did was both daring and foolhardy. This approach highlights a glaring **lack of leadership** from King Saul and his army commanders. Whether or not the situation unfolded as recounted, it's an inspiring story of Israel triumphing over their more numerous and better equipped enemies and helps explain some of the legend that built up around King David.



Likewise the story of the storm highlights the changeable and potentially treacherous conditions on Lake Galilee and the ever present threat of drowning in a fairly basic boat caught out during a storm. Again, the role of Jesus in calming the storm has qualities of a legend and is one piece of the puzzle in figuring out how Jesus was perceived, both during his ministry and after his death.

A third approach is to read the stories as **metaphor** ... For many of us, this is the **best** and most natural way of making meaning from these stories. Let's forget all the ghastly historical details and focus on who might be the **'giants'** in our own lives and how we might overcome them.

Think grandmothers against detention of refugee children vs. the Federal government and who is likely to win that rather uneven battle.

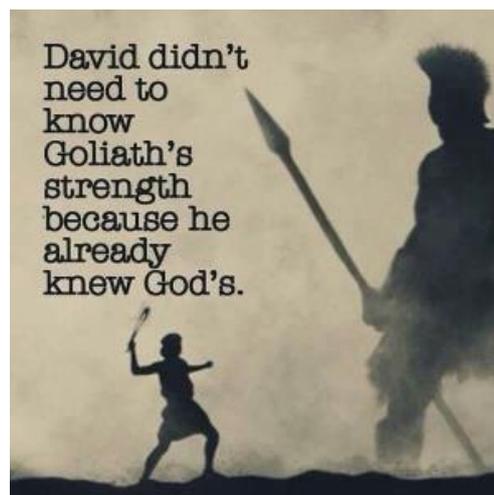


In the storm story, we might note that it happens at night when it's **dark** and when our thoughts often become their **blackest**. Whatever **'storms'** we may be facing – whether sickness, the Covid pandemic, relationship breakdown, loss of independence – Jesus' presence provides a calming influence in the midst of these storms that threaten us and he speaks peace to our hearts. Storms that we face in our lives can be faced if we will just look to Jesus with faith. We might also want to listen to those who've faced similar situations and battled through to the other side.

A fourth way to read these stories is **theologically** ... an approach that possibly takes more time and skills than the other approaches yet repays the effort ... we might note that the importance of the Goliath story is highlighted by the amount of **space** given to it – **some 60 verses** – suggesting we need to pay close attention to its message. We may also note that David has already been introduced into the larger narrative as the **future king of Israel**, and has been described as **a man after God's own**

**heart.** How will David act?

**The main point of difference** between David and the frightened soldiers is not his young age and inexperience but rather his **trust** in the God of Israel. David doesn't see a well-armed Philistine fighting machine before him but rather a person who stands in defiance of God. It is this God who inspires and gives courage to David, whose victory will not point to his own prowess as a fighter, but rather whose victory will be a witness to both the people of Israel and to the Philistines that there is a real and living God who dwells among the Israelites ... because from a human perspective David has no chance.



This trust in the power of the God of Israel is the main theological lesson to be learned and remembered from the OT Scriptures. This God who rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt is greater and more powerful than all the gods of the surrounding nations. This same God calls upon the people of Israel to live justly and uprightly and to care for the poor and for refugees in their midst. It is this God who helps David to overcome Goliath and equips him to be king. And it is this God who is to be worshipped and followed.

The Gospel story has similar nuances, but this time focused on **Jesus**. The significance of the story is that it's one of several episodes that demonstrate the **authority** of Jesus – his authority over the natural elements and the chaos of the sea, his authority over evil spirits and his authority over sickness and even death. The theological thrust of the story then is not how to overcome storms but rather **who** to put your trust in – namely **Jesus**, who in this instance has authority and power similar to God. It's then up to us as readers how we will join the dots between Jesus and God.



The message today is part of our series on **leadership**, so I want to finish by looking at how leaders might help us in times of trouble and uncertainty.

One lesson that we might learn from David and the disciples is that if we only look at and focus on what we can see right in front of us, it may appear terrifying and overwhelming ... leaving us paralysed by fear and by thoughts of what might happen. Good leaders like David help us **to see the world differently**, they **help us to see clearly** and they **encourage us to trust in God** and to use the **resources available** to us. ... When we think about the future of our church here at Croydon and about our mission and about our property development we need to see God's bigger picture and not be intimidated by what's immediately in front of us.

Another lesson we might learn, is that leaders **don't always have the answers**. King Saul was as frightened as the rest of his army – perhaps more frightened because he was the one who should go out and face Goliath. He was thinking in pragmatic personal terms of how to negotiate a path through this enormous challenge without getting himself killed. Sometimes in such circumstances we

need to listen to the voice of a David coming from left field, making a seemingly outrageous suggestion, because God may be speaking or working through that person.

**Leaders listen to discern God's direction however it may come.**

A third lesson of leadership in times of trouble is to **point people towards the resources of God**. Like Saul, the disciples didn't know what to do, so they called on Jesus, who so often spoke and acted with the authority of God. David was just a boy, but trusted in a big God to help him. So whatever 'giants' or 'storms' may be threatening our life, the clear advice and example of Scripture is to turn to God for strength and peace and wisdom.

**Leaders dare us to trust in the provision of God ... give us today our daily bread ... provide all that we need.**

*Good leaders*

- *help us to see clearly*
- *encourage us to trust in God*
- *don't always have the answers*
- *point people towards the resources of God*
- *dare us to trust in the provision of God*

We're going to sing a song now that asks us to trust in God who is faithful and who provides an anchor of peace and hope in the midst of whatever storms we face. We'll sing it through twice. The song is called [\*\*Faithful One by Brian Doerksen\*\*](#).