

4 July 2021 – Leadership 5

BIBLE READINGS

2 Samuel 11:1-9, 14-15, 26-27; 12:1-7a

Mark 6:1-6a

MESSAGE – Leading in the easy and the tough times

When it comes to leadership, is it more difficult to lead during times of **crisis** or when things are **going well**? Certainly the public scrutiny of leaders is high when times are tough ... think of the focus on State and Federal government leaders during the Covid pandemic with nearly daily press conferences and rapidly changing health guidelines. Whether you're the Premier of NSW or Queensland, suddenly every comment and every decision is reported and analysed and awkward questions are asked. Tough decisions need to be made that won't please lots of people. So there is pressure on leaders and close public scrutiny in these tough times.

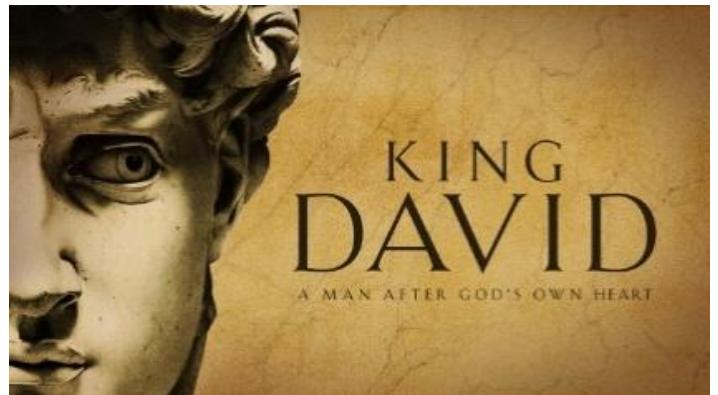


But the tough times won't last forever, and eventually easier times will return where there is less attention on leaders. These easier times allow focus on the **important** rather than the **urgent**, for leaders to be **proactive** rather than **reactive**. So it might be the time to do the detailed planning and costing on new quarantine facilities, for instance, to reduce the probability of Covid escaping from hotel quarantine.

I wonder if it's actually harder to lead well when people aren't watching so closely ... since complacency can set in and decisions can be made by routine or habit. For a Christian leader, it's the easier seasons in our life when spiritual disciplines become more important. It's often much easier to pray, for instance, when things are tough and our minds are focused on the people in need and the issues right in front of us. It's harder to pray consistently when everything is going smoothly.



The historical books in the OT that tell the story of Israel are nothing if not refreshingly **honest** in their portrayal of leaders. Whether it's Saul, David or Solomon, we're given insights into their best and worst moments – and it's not always pretty. Fighting battles and leading the nation in times of crisis were clearly important aspects of leadership – but so were personal integrity and the inner spiritual life of the leaders themselves. Today's story about King David is surely included as a **warning** in how **not** to lead. It also highlights the consequences that flow from our actions.



David had endured years of political intrigue under Saul's leadership and emerged as a courageous and inspirational leader. After Saul's death he was finally able to rule as the undisputed king over a united Israel. He'd defeated the Philistines at last and there was a period of peace. The story is set in springtime – when kings traditionally go out to battle – but this time David stays behind in Jerusalem. There's no explanation given as to why he wasn't leading the army. Perhaps he was sick or just wanted some quiet R&R. We simply don't know.



What we **do** know is that David spies a beautiful young woman bathing and desires her sexually. Now when David moved to Jerusalem he already had six wives and we're told he then took more wives and concubines – so he wasn't short of sexual partners. But when he sees Bathsheba, his imagination starts working and **lust** takes over – he **wants** her, **takes** her and **sleeps** with her. That's what you can do if you're the king ... there seemed to be no consideration given to **consent** or to **morality**. He was told that Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David's inner circle of soldiers. So David's actions amount to adultery if not sexual assault or even rape, yet David carries on regardless.

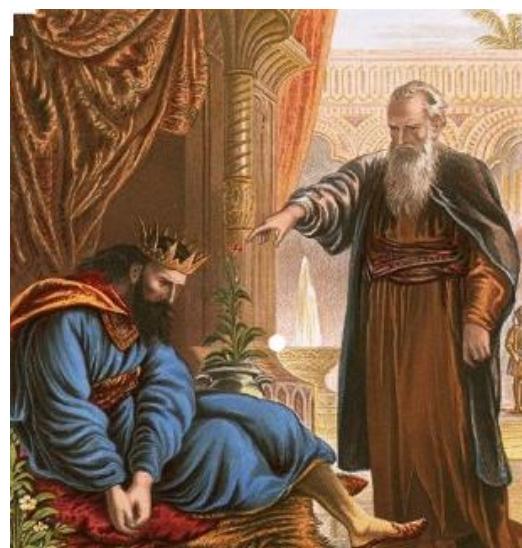
It gets worse. ... Bathsheba becomes pregnant and it's obvious that her husband, Uriah, isn't the father because he's been away fighting in David's army. So David

schemes to have Uriah brought back to Jerusalem, hoping he will sleep with his wife. When this scheme doesn't work, David arranges to have Uriah abandoned in battle. In our modern legal system, David commits **conspiracy to murder**.



It's a rather grisly story all round. What on earth has happened to David, the person introduced to us as a man after God's heart – a person who worships God fervently, who seeks God in prayer and who has high moral standards? Has power corrupted David? Or has peace and easy living dulled his faith and his moral compass?

David has fooled himself into thinking that his actions are somehow justifiable until Nathan the prophet traps him with a parable that exposes his hypocrisy and sin. David repents, most famously in Psalm 51, but the damage has been done and there are consequences that flow from his actions. David's appalling example is later followed by his children who at various times engage in equally lustful behaviour, in rape, murder and treason. One salutary lesson we might learn is that if all this can happen to David, then none of us is immune from falling into sin.



It also suggests that leaders need to be on alert during the easy times. It's in these times that we're more likely to give in to **temptation** and more likely to become **complacent**. Earlier this year, the Prime Minister Scott Morrison assured us many times that vaccinating Australia's population against Covid was '**not a race**'. We'd done the hard yards last year and we could rest on our laurels and enjoy a slow roll-out of vaccines across 2021. This image was taken back in February when things were looking rosy.



Five months on and with nearly every state and territory in lockdown, that complacent attitude doesn't look too good now.

During the easy times we can **take our eyes off what's important**, and ignore what actually gives us strength and perseverance. For Christian leaders, much of last year was spent trying to help people stay connected and valued, and to find new ways for the community to gather and to worship. Other aspects of our life such as mission and building redevelopment necessarily took a back seat. But now that our life is more predictable, we need to shift our focus a little. We need to increase our focus on areas such as faith development and spiritual disciplines – developing habits of prayer and seeking after justice, living simply and caring for the earth, and reflecting how we might better offer hospitality and love our neighbour.

Finally, the Gospel reading set down for today from Mark chapter 6 shows that Jesus faced tough times as a leader. Having just healed a woman with a serious bleeding issue and raised a girl from death, he returns to his hometown of Nazareth. Rather than receiving a hero's welcome or at least recognition of his ministry, Jesus faces **sarcasm** and **scorn** ... where did the son of the carpenter get all this wisdom and power from? We're just as good as him!



In Australia we call this the **tall poppy syndrome**, where people are jealous of the achievements or perceived success of another person and so cut them down to size. It happens to many women in the workplace when male bosses feel intimidated or threatened. The lesson from Jesus is not to argue the case but to quietly carry on your calling – in this case for Jesus it is healing a few people – and then to move on and look for more fertile ground where his message and ministry will be more warmly received and embraced.

Coming back to David, he finally recognised his sin and repented, though no doubt the rumour mill went into overdrive and people knew fairly soon what had happened. David's stellar reputation was tarnished and there would be painful ongoing consequences in his own family. But David also knew God's character and had written many songs praising God's forgiveness and mercy. Now he had to throw himself before that mercy.

David learned a vital lesson that day about **power** and **strength**. As Paul writes in one of the other readings set down for today, we are only truly strong when we acknowledge our **weaknesses** and **frailties**, and when we recognize our **vulnerability**. It is in these moments Paul observes – based on his own failures – that we can receive the **grace** and **power** that comes from **Jesus** – grace that does not condemn but that frees us – and power not to dominate but to serve others.

*“My grace is sufficient for you,
for my power
is made perfect
in weakness.”*



These are important lessons – not just for David and Paul – but for all of us.

We're going to sing a much loved song now that picks up this sense of grace that lies at the heart of the Jesus' message of good news.

Let's stand as we sing **Amazing grace** ...