

Who Is My Enemy?

Tatjana Ljujić

Evensong, 21st June, 3rd Sunday After Trinity

1 Samuel 24.1-17

In this evening's reading from the First Book of Samuel, we find David, the future king of Israel, facing a temptation that must have seemed impossible to resist. David is hiding in a cave when Saul — the king from whose pursuit he hides, the king who seeks his life — walks unknowingly into David's grasp. Saul has pursued David relentlessly. He has driven him from home. He has hunted him across the wilderness. David's followers can scarcely believe their good fortune when Saul enters the cave, unaware that David and his men are hiding deep inside.

If you have been listening carefully to the reading, one detail will not have escaped you: Saul has entered the cave to use it as a toilet. Saul is utterly vulnerable: exposed, defenceless, and wholly oblivious to it all. This is the moment David's men have barely dared to imagine. It would have been so easy — caught off guard like this, stripped of everything that made him fearsome, Saul could be killed in an instant: without a battle, without risk. The temptation is not just understandable. It is almost irresistible. At last, they think, the enemy can be removed and justice can be done.

Their reasoning is perfectly logical. If Saul is the threat, eliminate Saul. Human history has proceeded according to precisely that logic more times than we can count. We convince ourselves that peace lies just on the other side of someone else's defeat — that if we could only remove the right person, silence the right opponent, then things would be well. Yet David refuses. He cuts only the corner of Saul's robe. And even that troubles his conscience.

The question is why. David knows full well what Saul has done, and what he may do again. But he looks at this man — crouching in the dark, defenceless, exposed, caught entirely off guard — and sees something that stops him cold: he sees the Lord's anointed.

However far Saul has fallen, there remains something about him that comes from God and cannot be erased by his failure. Whatever Saul has done, God has not finished with him. David knows it is not his place to decide otherwise. Moreover, it is in Saul's vulnerability — in this moment of exposure, indignity, and weakness — that David sees him most clearly. Stripped of his armour, his army, his authority, what remains is a man whose reality before God is greater than the threat he poses.

Recently, I have been reading Rowan Williams's new book, *Solidarity*. In it, he notes that one of the great temptations of modern life is to reduce people to categories. We turn people into labels. Useful and useless. Deserving and undeserving. Allies and opponents. Once that happens, we cease to encounter real human beings. We encounter only our own descriptions of them. The crucial question, Williams insists, is not whether another person is like me, or whether I agree with them, or whether I find them congenial. The crucial question is whether I can recognise them as fully human, even when they are difficult, threatening, or opposed to me; whether I can acknowledge them as a person whose reality places a claim upon me.

That is precisely what David does in the cave. Everyone around him sees Saul as a problem. David sees Saul. Everyone around him sees an enemy. David sees a person. Indeed, David sees something even more specific. He sees the Lord's anointed. He recognises that Saul's identity is not exhausted by his hostility. There remains something about Saul that David has no right to erase.

This does not mean pretending that Saul's actions are acceptable. Recognising another person's humanity does not mean disregarding justice, abandoning truth, or allowing harm to continue. It means refusing to deny that even those who do wrong remain persons whose reality is rooted in God and exceeds our categories.

We have become very good at categorising one another, and considerably less good at recognising one another as human, even less so as God's anointed. Yet that is precisely what each person is. To see another person truthfully is to recognise that their identity does not begin with our judgement of them. It

begins with God's claim upon them. And because we exist only in relation to God, our bonds with one another bear that divine claim too. We discover who we are through our encounter with others, whose reality places a claim upon us. This is what Williams means by 'solidarity': not simply standing alongside one another, still less agreeing with one another, but recognising that another person's humanity is bound up with my own.

We should be careful here. David's refusal to kill Saul is not a refusal of justice. Nor is it a command to accept abuse, to ignore wrongdoing, or to leave the vulnerable unprotected. Scripture consistently testifies to God's concern for those who suffer harm: the poor, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and all who are vulnerable to the power of others.

To prevent harm is a good thing. To defend the vulnerable is a good thing. To seek justice is a good thing. The question is not whether justice matters. The question is whether we can pursue it without denying the humanity of those who have done wrong.

David, standing over a vulnerable enemy with every opportunity to strike, chooses instead to remember that another human being remains more than the threat they pose or the wrong they have done. David's choice does not solve immediate problems. It does not remove danger. But it prevents him from becoming captive to hatred.

And perhaps that is where we must begin — not with agreement, nor with the pretence that differences do not matter, but with the difficult discipline of actually seeing the person in front of us. Not the category. Not the threat. Not the problem. The person.

David does not emerge from that cave a changed man in any obvious sense. Saul will pursue him again. The danger will return. Nothing is resolved. But David has refused to let enmity become the lens through which he sees the world. It is an act of profound moral seriousness — the recognition that another human being is always more than what they have done to us, always more than the role we have cast them in.

Wherever that recognition happens — in a cave, in a courtroom, in a conversation, in the quiet moment *before* we speak or respond angrily to a social media post — something of God’s work is already taking place.

In the darkness of that cave, David looks at the man who wants him dead and sees what God sees: a person, held, as David himself is held, in God’s hands.

Amen.

We continue in prayer.

Creator God, who has created all humanity in your image, teach us to recognise in every person the dignity you have given and will not withdraw.

Christ our Saviour, give us the courage to hold together truth and mercy, and to seek justice without surrendering our humanity.

Spirit of God, free us from the narrowing of vision that reduces others to a threat or a problem, and form in us the deep attentiveness of love, that we may live in solidarity with one another as those whose lives are bound together in God.

We gather up these prayers, and all other prayers uttered in this Cathedral Church today, and commend them to God in the words of the Grace.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore.

Amen.