

In The Mess - Rock Bottom – Sunday 30th May

Language is fascinating; do you agree? I often find myself thinking about words, expressions, a turn of phrase, the comparison between language a long time ago and today. Often at work I'll write on my friends whiteboard "word of the week" if I come across one that's interesting or amusing. This week's word of the week is: Hippopotomonstrosesquipedaliophobia (fear of long words).

William Shakespeare is widely thought to be a significant influence on our language. He introduced expressions we use still today and if he didn't have a word that fitted just right as he wanted, well he just made one up!: *dauntless* (Macbeth), *countless* (Titus Andronicus / Pericles) *eyesore* (The Taming of the Shrew) *foppish* (King Lear) *multitudinous* (Macbeth) *new-fangled* (Love's Labour's Lost / As You Like It)

Young people do that today. It's great fun picking up on their development of language. They make up new words too. My daughter Hannah will say things like "Oh my days, Dad your nose is absolutely mahoosive" or "Stacey got in soooooo much trouble today: she asked Mr Oboffanoff (that name's another story – ask me later if you want) to leave the class to go to the toilet but she wasn't very quick, she was a bit longage ..."

Then sometimes we come across old fashioned language we can't understand. For example in John Bunyan's Pilgrims progress we read of a place called the Slough of Despond (or the "swamp of despair") where the character Christian finds himself. The text reads:

'This miry Slough is such a place as cannot be mended; it is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore is it called the Slough of Despond: for still as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place; and this is the reason of the badness of this ground.'

That's a bit hard to understand as we don't speak or write like that anymore, so in short - The Slough of Despond was a horrible place, where people were so continually aware of the filth and dirt of their lives, a place where there was no escape from the burden of guilt, a constant sense of despair and a fear that there was actually no hope of getting out.

And I chose that example deliberately because it points us to where we are in the account of the life of David. Today we wouldn't say "we're in the Slough of Despond" maybe we'd say "we've reached rock bottom"... a constant sense of despair and a fear that there was actually no hope of getting out ... can you recognize feeling like that? Well rock bottom is precisely where David is when we pick up the next part of his life.

Last week we were thinking about the waiting time in his life. We learned how Jonathon made a covenant with him and how in Jonathon David found someone he could trust and confide. But then in 1 Samuel chapter 20 Jonathon helps David to escape from Saul's anger and then he fled to Gath leaving Jonathon behind, but Gath is too dangerous and he flees that place too (why was it dangerous – remember the story from Chapter 17 – read 1 Sam 17 v 4 – ***"A champion named Goliath who was from Gath came out of the Philistine camp"***) I can imagine David at that point thinking "Uh oh, think I've been spotted need a cunning plan" no wonder he gets out of there smartish. Let's pick up at 1 Samuel chapter 21.

1 Samuel 21 – through to 22 verse 2

So; another word for this week - Troglodyte (from the Greek meaning "cave-dweller," literally "one who creeps into holes). David had holed up in a cave and we too can be like that. Usually not literally living in a cave, but in a spiritual sense we can find ourselves holed up in caves. How many troglodytes out there this morning?

David was at the lowest moment of his life so far. He had no security, no food, no one to talk to, and no promise to cling to. He couldn't go back to the court of King Saul, he couldn't go back to Michal's house, he could think of a few other places but no they were not an option either. Have you ever thought "there's nowhere to go"? – Maybe not geographically speaking, but ever felt you've run out of options? Don't know which way to turn? Haven't got a Scooby what to do next? God understands. He doesn't leave you alone. We'll come back to that in a while.

So where does David go? He goes to a place in the wilderness where no one goes so hopefully no one will find him. He runs to a place where hopefully he'll be alone. You see the cave he found was in a desolate, desperate, wilderness. There are steep cliffs, a harsh arid eroded landscape where little rain brings little life. The region is by the Dead Sea – a place so acid (it's 8.6 times saltier than the oceans we swim in) that in and around it you'd struggle to find much life. So what language did David use to describe this experience? A Psalm that David wrote, gives us a glimpse of how he was feeling.

Psalm 142

And David wasn't the only one there.

Are you like me when it comes to wanting to fill in the gaps in stories that you haven't completely got your head round? Does it bug you when there's an unanswered question? Well I found myself wondering how on earth everyone found out about him being in the cave. He clearly wasn't very good at hiding. Just like when we used to play with the children and spend hours energetically searching everywhere but behind the massive lump in the lounge curtains. They thought they were genius at it but really they were rubbish hiders! David couldn't have been that good because pretty soon we read Chapter 22 verse 1 "When his brothers and his father's household heard about it, they went down to him there". And then before you know it 400 more turn up – "All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered round him". No wonder he didn't stay there: I think his cover was blown.

Quite a mixed bunch crammed into that cave wasn't there.

Everyone in distress came – The Hebrew word used here "zuk" means not only "in distress" but "under pressure, under stress". That sadly is something we face too often these days. The Daily Mail a couple of weeks ago printed an article where it made the point that the 'back to work' blues is impinging on our lives more and more and more; some would say almost to the extent where the medical profession are going to start thinking about it as a syndrome with a name maybe. But now instead of the blues kicking in around 8.00 o'clock Sunday evening, we wake up on a Sunday with a feeling of impending dread. So that's cutting our weekend in half in a sense so we don't feel as refreshed as we should on a Monday morning. We get up and can't face breakfast because of the knot in your stomach at the thought of what we have to face. Maybe that knot in the stomach is because you don't know whether today is actually the day you come home from that particular job for the last time. Maybe it's because you desperately need a job and can't find one. Maybe the pressure you face is something entirely different, but whatever it is those of us under pressure can learn from David's experience.

Everyone who was in debt came – The Hebrew word here “nashah” means to borrow on interest, to have a number of creditors. There were lots of people in that cave struggling to pay their bills. Financial difficulty was familiar in Saul’s kingdom and it’s certainly a reality today isn’t it. When the coalition government was locked in negotiation over policy and deals and we got snippets of what was being talked about in the news I found myself thinking more than once, what are you talking about ‘that’ for surely there are more important things to be dealing with. Sometimes I think priorities can get skewed - we’ve got ourselves into a situation where decisions were taken with satisfied certainty “Ooooh you can’t advertise alcohol on the TV or anywhere, or cigarettes, they’re terrible ...” but there seems to be no problem having hours of airtime devoted to BET365, Betfred, Betfair (what a misnomer), Betsomemore, Betanawfullotmore, Betmorethanyoucanaffordbutwedon’t care.com, foxy bingo, party bingo the list goes on and on. Hopefully we don’t put ourselves under pressure by gambling, but there are still real issues that we face in a world that seems to get more expensive by the day. Just like in David’s time, there is a refuge in God today.

Everyone who was discontented came - (an interesting point is that the word “discontent” is one of those words attributed as one of Shakespeare’s invented words) – The Hebrew used here “maar hephesh” means “to be in bitterness of soul, to have been wronged and mistreated. So we’re not talking about a bunch of malcontents in the sense of a bunch of moaners. This crowd were those who had just about taken all they could deal with and they couldn’t face any more. Saul had made the people ache under the burden of his rule. They were overtaxed, mistreated. They were ruled by a madman given to fits of depression and.... hold on a minute that sounds a bit like (better stop there before it all gets improperly political!). But seriously, it is true today. Often we feel life is using us as a punch bag and we have had enough. If that’s how we feel we don’t have to stay in the cave for the rest of our days. God is there.

But God was at work in the mess. One simple line starts for me to turn my focus to God in the midst of the darkness: at the end of verse 2 we read **“and he became their leader”**. You see David was at rock bottom, the 400 were at rock bottom, but together they would work out God’s way through the mess. David couldn’t have completely lost sight of God’s hand on his life and still allows God to use him. I have a hunch that the message for us as we covenant together to journey together in our rock bottom times, is that we should seek to shine a light, however dim, for each other; that we help each other out of the depths. And part of that is allowing those who are there with us to lead us in God’s ways not our ways. Maybe for David part of his journey out of the darkness was actually that he set his mind to what God equipped him to do. Be encouraged by that. God can still use us even in the dark times of our lives.

It didn’t mean David’s problems all disappeared as he concentrated on a specific task. I think that’s a bit of an unreal expectation. But it seems it might be true that David was starting to lift his head and see a way forward. There are scholars and theologians that think that Psalm 57 was written while David was still in the Cave. The title is “A Psalm of David, When he had fled from Saul into the cave”, but the language is looking a bit different to Psalm 142.

Psalm 57

Notice verse 4 – ***“I am in the midst of lions; I lie among ravenous beasts, men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords”*** I have an inkling he’s actually referring to the 400 people in the cave with him. I can certainly imagine when I get to the point where you roar with rage, or pour out frustrations and pace up and down like a caged animal – do you think that is what he means by these verses. Life certainly wouldn’t have been easy living with a whole load of needy, desperate people like that. But he can lift his head a little now and say at verse 1 ***“Have mercy on me O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge”***. Then in verse 2 ***“I cry out to God most high God sends his love and his faithfulness”***. Let’s be real with each other about coping in the situation, but slowly learn to say together ***“have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge”*** Max Lucado tells the story of a man, a cave dweller he called him, who had just lost his wife, whose daughter was getting sicker by the day, but he found God in the midst of that. His words were ***“You’ll never know that Jesus is all that you need until Jesus is all that you have”***. Max Lucado sums it up: Wilderness survivors find refuge in god’s presence. They also find community in God’s people. That’s why we covenant together and express our faith as a body. If we make God our refuge not the bank balance, or our job, or our spouse, or the respect we have because of what we do, or our own intellect, or whatever then when the dark times come He is the foundation that is firm beneath our feet.

We don’t definitely know precisely when this was written in the timeline of what was going on in David’s life, but some like the pastor and theologian Charles Swindoll think that Psalm 34 would fit into a pattern of looking back on the rock bottom times and acknowledging God at work in the mess of it. The pattern seems to be Psalm 142 was written as he hits rock bottom (the language of Psalm 142 “I cry aloud ... I pour out my complaint ... when my spirit grows faint ... no one cares for my life”); Psalm 57 when he is in the cave but starting to be able to get to his knees and find refuge in God (“Have mercy on me ... in you my soul takes refuge ... God sends his love and his faithfulness”), and then Psalm 34 is written when he’s back on his feet and able to say: “I will extol the Lord at all times”

Psalm 34 verses 1 – 10

So that’s what we learn of David’s life at this point, but the question for us this morning is “Where do you turn when the bottom falls out of your life?”