

In the Mess

DISARMING ANGER

I, like you, have had my great moments in my Christian life. Those moments where I've stepped out in faith and trusted that God would meet me along the way. Those moments when I've been able to say – I'll do this whatever it takes! Those moments where my true colours as a son of the Most High God have come shining through. Those moments where I have been able to recognize the extraordinary presence of God working in my ordinary life, and those moments have for me, and for you, been the moments when my faith has grown most dramatically.

I remember when I was asked to become the leader of the beach Mission in Nefyn. Nefyn was a place I had learnt so much from others and held the leaders in high esteem, so when I was asked if I would consider becoming the leader it was quite a big deal for me. It was a place my confidence had grown at a time when I was low in self-confidence. It was a place with a significant history both in Nefyn and in people's lives, and to be asked to be the leader was somewhat daunting.

I asked Ian Warner to pray with me – and he got a picture of Anglesey! (He didn't know that Nefyn was just across the water on the Welsh Llyn Peninsula)! We felt that God was clearly guiding me towards this role; it was a massive step of faith for me to say yes! All the planning, organising, and drawing on team together – suddenly being responsible for things I'd simply enjoyed up until then! Leading to that great sense of "Yes!" I did it – Nefyn Mission happened!!!

It was a great feeling and sense of achievement when it dawned on me it had happened and it didn't fall apart! Also a great feeling thinking – yes – maybe we heard God right on that one! Leading Nefyn was a significant step towards going into Baptist Ministry. There was a great sense, going to train for ministry that we have to trust God in this. Giving up the security of teaching and stepping out into what was really the unknown.

I remember at the time describing it as feeling like I was standing on the edge of a cliff with a parachute on. I knew that if I jumped, the parachute would open, but I still didn't want to jump! We did jump, and trusting God was a great experience, how God met us at every point along the way.

Leading the church through the redevelopment project was full of great – if challenging – moments. Walking home sometimes thinking – why did I ever say I would do this job? Contrasted with the response to gift days on many different occasions where you gave so generously, and the day we had the inauguration service here in 2003 – what a day that was! At that point you can't help thinking that all the sacrifice is worth it! Great moments of seeing God at work.

David had his great moments too: the day Samuel came to Jesse to anoint the next king of Israel. David, out in the fields tending the sheep is summoned home because Samuel is waiting, and when Samuel anoints David with oil in the presence of his father and brothers. It says the Spirit of God came upon David in power from that day on, and David does some amazing things.

He turns up at the battle field to bring bread and cheese to his brothers and there he sees Goliath. David hears Goliath's taunt to the Israelite army, but he can't work out why no-one will fight him. "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he would defy the armies of the living God?" David rejects Saul's armour, picks his five smooth stones from the brook, and takes his sling and steps out in faith moving towards Goliath. And that day David achieves a massive victory. Even after David has to flee from Saul he still has his great moments. When Saul wanders into a cave in which David and his men are hiding, he resists the temptation to exact revenge. He recognises that Saul is God's appointed man, at God's appointed time, to do God's appointed job, in God's appointed place and he refuses to touch him. His men, of course, tried to paint a different perspective – David this is your God given opportunity to be shot of him. But David is able to rise above temptation and he has a great moment of submission before God.

Now the truth is, that for all my great moments, and for all your great moments and for all David's great moments, we don't live like that all the time do we?

“Now Samuel died, and all Israel assembled and mourned for him; and they buried him at his home in Ramah. Then David moved down into the Desert of Maon. A certain man in Maon, who had property there at Carmel, was very wealthy. He had a thousand goats and three thousand sheep, which he was shearing in Carmel. His name was Nabal and his wife’s name was Abigail. She was an intelligent and beautiful woman, but her husband, a Calebite, was surly and mean in his dealings. While David was in the desert, he heard that Nabal was shearing sheep. So he sent ten young men and said to them, “Go up to Nabal at Carmel and greet him in my name. Say to him: ‘Long life to you! Good health to you and your household! And good health to all that is yours! Now I hear that it is sheep-shearing time. When your shepherds were with us, we did not ill-treat them, and the whole time they were at Carmel nothing of theirs was missing. Ask your own servants and they will tell you. Therefore be favourable toward my young men, since we come at a festive time. Please give your servants and your son David whatever you can find for them.’” When David’s men arrived, they gave Nabal this message in David’s name. Then they waited. Nabal answered David’s servants, ‘Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?’ David’s men turned round and went back. When they arrived, they reported every word. David said to his men, ‘Put on your swords!’ So they put on their swords, and David put on his. About four hundred men went up with David, while two hundred stayed with the supplies. One of the servants told Nabal’s wife Abigail: ‘David sent messengers from the desert to give our master his greetings, but he hurled insults at them. Yet these men were very good to us. They did not ill-treat us, and the whole time we were out in the fields near them nothing was missing. Night and day they were a wall around us all the time we were herding our sheep near them. Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no-one can talk to him.’ Abigail lost no time. She took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five seahs of roasted grain, a hundred cakes of raisins and two hundred cakes of pressed figs, and loaded them on donkeys. Then she told her servants, ‘Go on ahead; I’ll follow

you.’ But she did not tell her husband Nabal. As she came riding her donkey into a mountain ravine, there were David and his men descending towards her, and she met them. David had just said, ‘It’s been useless – all my watching over this fellow’s property in the desert so that nothing of his was missing. He has paid me back evil for good. May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!’ When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and bowed down before David with her face to the ground. She fell at his feet and said: ‘My Lord, let the blame be on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you; hear what your servant has to say. May the lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name – his name is Fool, and folly goes with him. But as for me, your servant. I did not see the men my master sent. Now since the Lord has kept you, my master, from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hand, as surly as the Lord lives and as you live, may your enemies and all who intend to harm my master be like Nabal. And let this gift, which your servant has brought to my master, be given to the men who follow you. Please forgive your servant’s offence, for the Lord will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my master, because he fights the Lord’s battles. Let no wrong doing be found in you as long as you live. Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my master will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the Lord your God. But the lives of your enemies he will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling. When the Lord has done for my master every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him leader over Israel, my master will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself. And when the Lord has brought my master success, remember your servant.’ David said to Abigail, ‘Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by day break. Then David accepted from her hand what she had brought to him and said, ‘Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request.’ When Abigail went to Nabal, he was in the house holding

a banquet like that of a king. He was in high spirit and very drunk. So she told him nothing until day break. Then in the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him all these things, and his heart failed him and he became like a stone. About ten days later, the Lord struck Nabal and he died. When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, 'Praise be to the Lord, who has upheld my cause against Nabal for treating me with contempt. He has kept his servant from doing wrong and has brought Nabal's wrong doing down on his own head. Then David sent word to Abigail, asking her to become his wife. His servants went to Carmel and said to Abigail, 'David has sent us to you to take you to become his wife.' She bowed down with her face to the ground and said, 'Here is your maid servant, ready to serve you and wash the feet of my master's servants.' Abigail quickly got on a donkey and, attended by her five maids, went with David's messengers and became his wife. David had also married Ahinoam of Jezreel, and they both were his wives. But Saul had given his daughter Michal, David's wife, to Paltiel son of Laish, who was from Gallim." (1 Samuel 25 v 1-44)

Here's David, off the back of his great moments, on his way to Nabal, with murder in his eyes! Here's this great man of God, the anointed next king of Israel, the one chosen by God, out for revenge. Here's the guy who refused to take Saul's life when he had the chance, consumed with anger to the point of wanting to wipe out his enemy. What a contrast..... or maybe that's exactly the point.... and the reason this story speaks to us all! You see in our great moments we are full of God – God is close, powerful, present and active in and through us and yet, and yet, we all have moments when in truth we are full of ourselves and empty of God don't we?

There is no sign in David at this moment of his great moments is there? And friends, sometimes that's true of us too isn't it? And it's in those moments that we need an Abigail, just as David needed Abigail. David and his men have been in the wilderness after fleeing from Saul, but they've become a bit like the good Samaritan - they've made themselves useful in what is a high crime environment. The wilderness was full of bandits and those ready to take advantage of anyone who was travelling through. David and his men had effectively become the people who would protect the travellers from attacks. And they also provided

protection for the herds of sheep being grazed in the wilderness – easy pickings for bandits (1 Sam 25 v 16). They had become a bit like the neighbourhood watch of the wilderness! Perhaps, by their very presence, David and his men had brought a semblance of law and order to a place normally more associated with anarchy.

Shearing time was a time for celebration and of a great feast to mark its importance. It was very reasonable for David and his men to ask for some of the food from the banquet of those he had been helping. So he sends some men to ask Nabal for some of the leftovers! Nabal insults David by refusing him any food and lumping him with the criminals more normally found in the wilderness. David is furious and vows to kill everyone in Nabal's family. Nabal's insulting response provoked the worst side of David. That ever happen to you?

Sometimes our worst side is provoked and then we're on a dangerous path. David's anger is provoked and suddenly he's lost all sense of his identity as God's anointed. Not only could he not see his own identity in God, he couldn't see it for Nabal either. I've made that mistake – I have had times when I've lost not only my own identity in God, but also the identity of others as God sees them. And the tragedy here is, David is on the verge of becoming another Saul – getting rid of those who threaten him. You ever wanted to 'get rid' of those who threaten you? Everything is on a knife edge.

Seems to me that David, at this moment, was incapable of anything other than the path he had begun. Thank God for Abigail. Abigail heard what was happening and was able to anticipate the devastating consequences if it played out the way David wanted it! She chose to stand in the gap – or more literally she chooses to kneel in the road! She gathers food, practically a banquet, and heads out to meet David. She kneels in the road before him and effectively says, "Please, please, please don't do this!" She reminds David that this is not the action fit for a future king of Israel. Basically she says to him, "Look David, this is not good. It is not worthy of who you are – God's anointed future king. Let God be God, you are to fight his battles not your own ones."

In 1 Sam 25 v 29 she reminds David that his life is totally caught up in what God is doing, that he can't go off and act just as he wants to. She reminds him of God's call, God's promise, God's covenant and God's word to David. "You can't be your true self and act in this way towards Nabal." Her reference to the use of a sling would remind David of his victory over Goliath with his sling. She's basically reminding David that he isn't God, and vengeance is God's business not David's. She challenges David not to be like Nabal – a fool! This is one brave woman. She stands in the way of an angry David and 400 angry men and yet remarkably David stops! As he listens, Abigail extraordinarily speaks God back into David's life. What is extraordinary is that Abigail is, in her time, insignificant! She was a woman in a man's world, she didn't have a weapon as she stood before a small army who did, but she spoke God back into David's life, and she reversed a devastating situation.

Abigail is described as beautiful and intelligent but her beauty is more than skin deep: she is beautiful on the outside but also beautiful on the inside. David almost brought a catastrophe on himself. What he got right was that he listened to Abigail. Friends, is there some area of life in which you need to stop and listen to your Abigail? It might surprise you as to whom God might use as your Abigail. Or would you rather continue on the course you have set – whatever the consequences might be? Who is the fool in your story?

"Ernest Gordon groans in the Death House of Chungkai, Burma. He listens to the moans of the dying and smells the stench of the dead. Pitiless jungle heat bakes his skin and parches his throat. Had he the strength, he could wrap one hand around his bony thigh. But he has neither the energy nor the interest. Diphtheria has drained both; he can't walk; he can't even feel his body. He shares a cot with flies and bedbugs and awaits a lonely death in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.

How harsh the war has been on him. He entered World War11 in his early twenties, a robust Highlander in Scotland's Argyle and Sutherland Brigade. But then came the capture by the Japanese, months of backbreaking labour in the jungle, daily beatings, and slow starvation. Scotland seems forever away. Civility, even further. The Allied soldiers behave like barbarians, stealing from each other,

robbing dying colleagues, fighting for food scraps. Server's short change rations so they can have extra for themselves. The law of the jungle has become the law of the camp.

Gordon is happy to bid it adieu. Death by disease trumps life in Chungkai. But then something wonderful happens. Two new prisoners, in whom hope still stirs, are transferred to the camp. Though also sick and frail, they heed a higher code. They share their meagre meals and volunteer for extra work. They cleanse Gordon's ulcerated sores and massage his atrophied legs. They give him his first bath in six weeks. His strength slowly returns and, with it, his dignity.

Their goodness proves contagious, and Gordon contracts a case. He begins to treat the sick and share his rations. He even gives away his few belongings. Other soldiers do likewise. Over time, the tone of the camp softens and brightens. Sacrifice replaces selfishness. Soldiers hold worship services and bible studies.

Twenty years later, when Gordon served as chaplain of Princeton University, he described the transformation with these words:

Death was still with us – no doubt about that. But we were slowly being freed from its destructive grip..... Selfishness, hatred... and pride were all anti-life. Love.... self-sacrifice.... and faith, on the other hand, were the essence of life ... gifts of God to men... Death no longer had the last word at Chungkai.”¹

Perhaps our challenge is to be an Abigail, to have beauty on the inside from a life full of God and to allow that beauty to show in the places we go; to allow the contagious power of kindness to follow from our hearts towards those we live with, work with, do life with; to demonstrate the strength of a gentle heart in situations that could potentially explode. And perhaps our challenge is to stand in the gap for someone. Everyone needs an Abigail friend: your husband/wife; your children; your boss; those you line manage; your friends; your neighbours..... Do you have the courage of Abigail?

¹ Lucado, Max: *“Facing Your Giants”*, Thomas Nelson 2006, page 53-54

Abigail placed herself between David and Nabal and she offered to be punished for Nabal's sin. Doesn't that remind you of something?

"One evening after work detail, a Japanese guard announced that a shovel was missing. The officer kept the Allies in formation, insisting that someone had stolen it. Screaming in broken English, he demanded that the guilty man step forward. He shouldered his rifle, ready to kill one prisoner at a time until a confession was made.

A Scottish soldier broke ranks, stood stiffly at attention, and said, "I did it." The officer unleashed his anger and beat the man to death. When the guard was finally exhausted, the prisoners picked up the man's body and their tools and returned to camp. Only then were the shovels recounted. The Japanese soldier had made a mistake. No shovel was missing after all."²

Abigail pointed David back to God. Jesus Christ stood in the gap to point us towards God and save us from catastrophe. When we take our eyes off our Nabal and look to God things can change. One prisoner can change a camp. One Abigail saved a family. How about you?

Preached in Crawley Baptist church on Sunday 20th June 2010 by Rev. Ian Phillips.

² *Ibid*, page 60