

Followers of the Way

Sermon: 14 November 2021

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1 Samuel 17: 32-50

At the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour, on the 11th November 1918, the Armistice, bringing to an end the hostilities between the allies and Germany, was signed at Le Francourt near Compiègne, in France. Precise figures are unknown, but there are estimated, between 1914-18 to have been 40 million casualties, half of which died. For the most part these were young men, many below the age of 30, and many in their teens. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to those who endured the conflict and paid the ultimate price, to preserve the freedom of those back home, and to defend our land.

We must equally give thanks for those still battling to defend our freedom today – and of course we remember those who have lost their lives in more recent conflicts, such as Afghanistan, or suffered terrible, life-changing injuries. We thank and honour them – and some of you perhaps will have personal memories today.

But apart from armed conflict, there are other battles we need to hold in mind, and most especially the deadly battle currently being waged in society to destroy the values on which our culture is founded. Values of faithfulness, commitment, purity, goodness, duty, selflessness, self-sacrifice, self-control – all expressive of our Christian heritage and belief. What we are seeing in the world today is a naked and overt conflict of ideologies, with forces hostile to God seeking to take control, and to silence all opposition.

It's an age-old battle, of course, between good and evil, God and the devil. And evil has grown very strong over the last century, because of the 'worship' mankind has given it, sacrificing our unborn, celebrating and encouraging promiscuity and perversion. Worst of all, rejecting God ... because we're in control, we say, we don't need all that superstitious nonsense any more.

This kind of approach, with all it entails, is so endemic and so frightening, that's it's tempting just to give up and go with the flow. To keep our heads down and stay out of the firing line, in fact, in case we become a target.

Well, I imagine that was how the Israelites felt when they were attacked by the Philistines and the giant Goliath challenged them to send out a champion to fight him and settle the outcome of the war by single combat. V.4 we read Goliath was nine feet tall, with bronze armour and bronze weapons, and his spear shaft was like a weaver's rod with an iron point, weighing 600 shekels – the note in my Bible says that would have been about 15 pounds. I don't know much about weapons, but that sounds pretty scary to me. And not surprisingly, the Israelites, to a man, said, 'Whoa, not me.' In the whole army, we read that there wasn't one man willing to put himself forward to

answer the challenge, so there was a real danger that the Israelites were going to end up enslaved, conquered by the Philistines.

Goliath repeated this challenge every day, and no one would stand against him ... until David came along. Now David, son of Jesse, was, we read, still pretty much a child, too young to go with his brothers to war. Instead he had to stay at home looking after the sheep for his father. But that fateful day, Jesse sent him with bread and grain, to see how his brothers were getting on at the front. I guess it would have been quite a thrilling outing for David – off to see his brothers ... the great Israelite army! But when David got to Elah, where the two sides were lined up facing each other, he found an extraordinary situation. Goliath came out and roared his usual daily challenge and, to David's amazement, all the brave fighting men of Israel ... ran away. You couldn't see them for dust. Although let's be fair, they did find time to tell David that if anyone was stupid enough to accept the challenge and win, Saul would give that man great wealth, and even marry him to his daughter. V.25 '... the king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his father's family from taxes in Israel.' Not a bad inducement, when you think about it, but clearly not enough.

Now okay, you might think David was a bit of an idiot – very young, certainly – but this seemed to him a no-brainer. "Who is this uncircumcised man that he should defy the armies of the living God?" he asked (v.26). The response to this was pretty much ridicule - and anger on the part of his brothers, who had arrived by this time and called him conceited. And then Saul got to hear of it. And David still wouldn't shut up. He said to the king, "... your servant will go and fight him."

Now, however you look at it, this would have appeared ludicrous. David was a young boy – he was even too small to wear the armour Saul lent him. He couldn't walk in it, he couldn't handle Saul's sword. So, what did he do? Go home, tail between his legs?

No. He took it all off and said, 'You know what, I'll go like I am. I won't bother with the armour. Won't use your weapons. Instead I'll stick with the sling I've been using out in the desert to fight off the lions and the bears while I was looking after the sheep. I'm pretty good with that.'

So, was David just being arrogant? No, not at all. The key thing about David was that he had real faith. He knew that the God of Israel was sovereign, and that there was no way He was going to allow some jumped-up Philistine to insult Him and conquer His people. David would have known all the stories, of course, of what Yahweh had done in Egypt – but the difference between him and the rest of the army was that he believed them.

The second important thing to understand is that God had been training David out in the desert since he was knee-high, for precisely this task. As David looked after the flocks, from the sound of it, they'd been pretty frequently attacked by wild beasts – David specifically mentions lions and bears – and the boy had learnt to use his sling with deadly effect. And that's something we all need to know. When God calls someone to a specific task, first of all, He prepares them. He never sends you in cold, but first gives you the training you're going to need – and sometimes that can be pretty rough, because it has to prepare you to stand against attack. To be absolutely unshakeable, so that you

won't falter or back down. And God doesn't just provide the weapons you're going to need, but He teaches you how to use them. Do some of you feel you've been through a rough time, and that everything seems to have been against you? Well, rejoice, because God has been training you for precisely this time, so that you can stand.

So here, David knew he couldn't fight Goliath in his own strength. That he was going to have to rely on God, and use the weapons that God had trained him for. In David's case, it was a sling. So the lesson for us here is to be bold, but not to try and rely on our own strength, because we'll fail; instead we've got to rely on God and just follow His commands. And here, in this story, right on cue, God comes up with goods. V.40, David chose 5 small stones from the stream and put them in his pouch, and he took the sling in his hand.

Now looked at objectively, this is madness. Five small pebbles against this giant, this armoured and 'weaponised' man, who's been trained to kill. God was having a laugh, wasn't He? But David had been trained by God, remember, and these five, small pebbles were exactly right. David said, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin ... but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied." And I'm going to win.

Because Goliath had challenged God, David knew that God was going to take him down – so that the whole world would know there was a God in Israel and that He was sovereign.

The battle is the Lord's.

And this is something we have to fully understand and know about the fight we're in today. Evil has got very cocky and is challenging God, but God is in control and He will not let evil win. God knows exactly what He's going to do, and the outcome is already decided. He's even described that final conflict in Scripture, when Satan's going to be cast into the lake of fire, and all of humanity at that point will come under judgment. What we're seeing now is a process of refinement, a last chance for people to turn to him and be saved. This is why we're seeing so many battlegrounds and why the fighting is so vicious. But God has trained us for this time, and He gives us the weapons to allow us, in His name, to fight the battles and win. We are only called, like David, to stand.

So, as we remember those who, for our sake, have given their lives in war, let's honour them by keeping faith in the battle that God is calling us to now. By God's mercy at the moment, in this country at least, it's not a battle being fought with guns and missiles, but it *is* deadly, and if we don't engage in this fight, no one else will. So the message for us today is, trust in the Lord, and go in His name. And let us stand against evil.

